KEI UEKAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY TEDDY
MECHANICAL DESIGN BY NAOHIRO WASHIO
II
MAY THESE LEADEN BATTLEGROUNDS
LEAVE NO TRACE
Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs

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THE DEVIL'S BULLET
Holds the power of Oblivion.
Erases the existence and all the
achievements of whomever it
hits, Reprogramming and shifting
the history of the world...
MAY THESE LEADEN BATTLEGROUNDS
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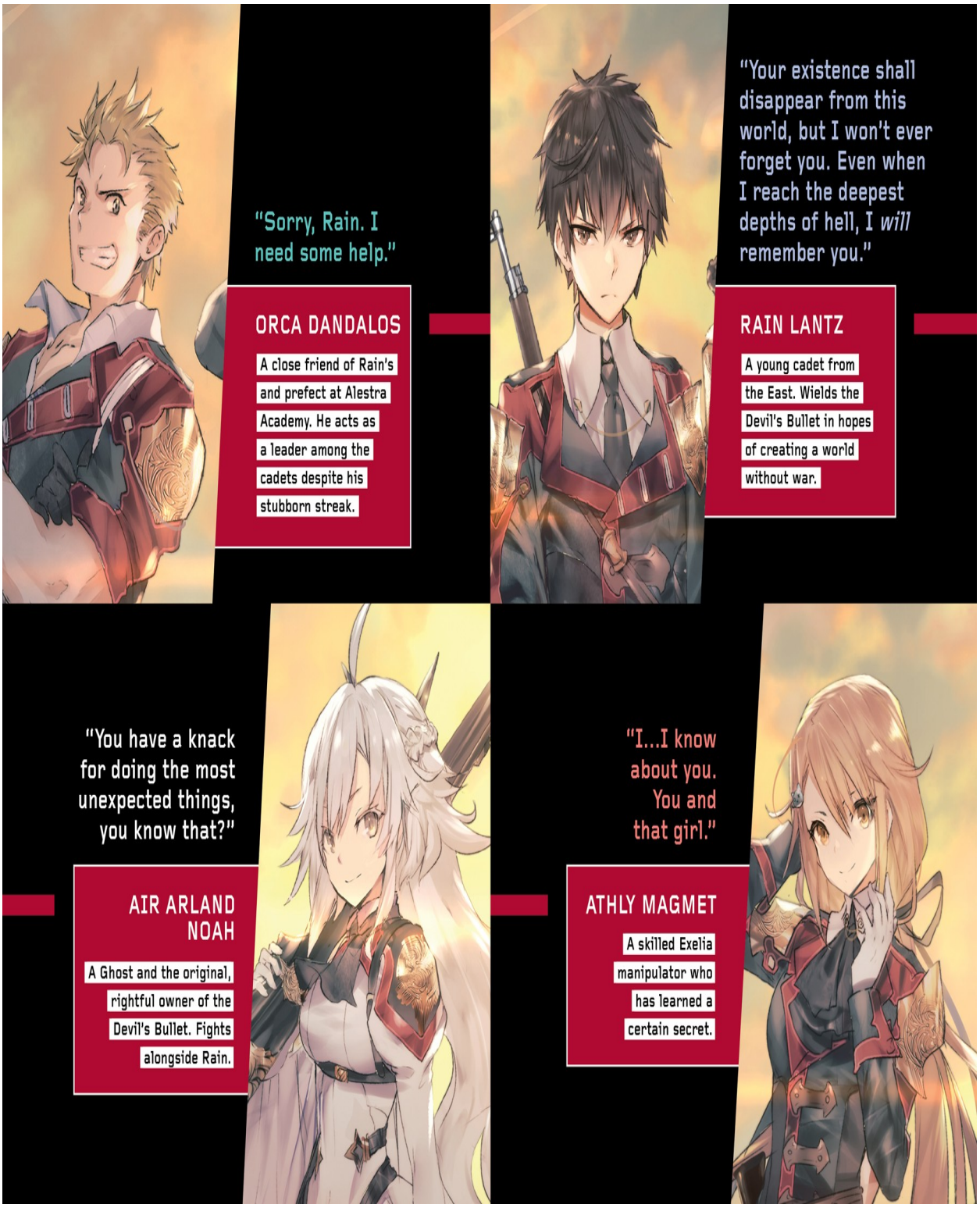

"Sorry, Rain. I need some help."
ORCA DANDALOS
A close friend of Rain's and prefect at Alestra Academy. He acts as a leader among the cadets despite his stubborn streak.
"Your existence shall disappear from this world, but I won't ever forget you. Even when I reach the deepest depths of hell, I *will* remember you."
RAIN LANTZ
A young cadet from the East. Wields the Devil's Bullet in hopes of creating a world without war.
"You have a knack for doing the most unexpected things, you know that?"
AIR ARLAND NOAH
A Ghost and the original, rightful owner of the Devil's Bullet. Fights alongside Rain.
"I...I know about you. You and that girl."
ATHLY MAGMET
A skilled Exelia manipulator who has learned a certain secret.

DEADRIM
A fledgling Ghost from the West. Fights using a sword and the Crystalline Bullet.
"Get away from her!"
"A pity, I'll admit."
Rain intuitively knew that the girl was the shadow he saw on the snowy mountain. Thus, her identity didn't matter. His Qualia blared at him like an alarm bell. She was *extremely* dangerous.
I have to shoot her...!

“It’s such a tight squeeze...”
“Well, obviously. This seat was meant for one!”

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
NAOHIRO WASHIO

EXELIA PROTOTYPE—ε1

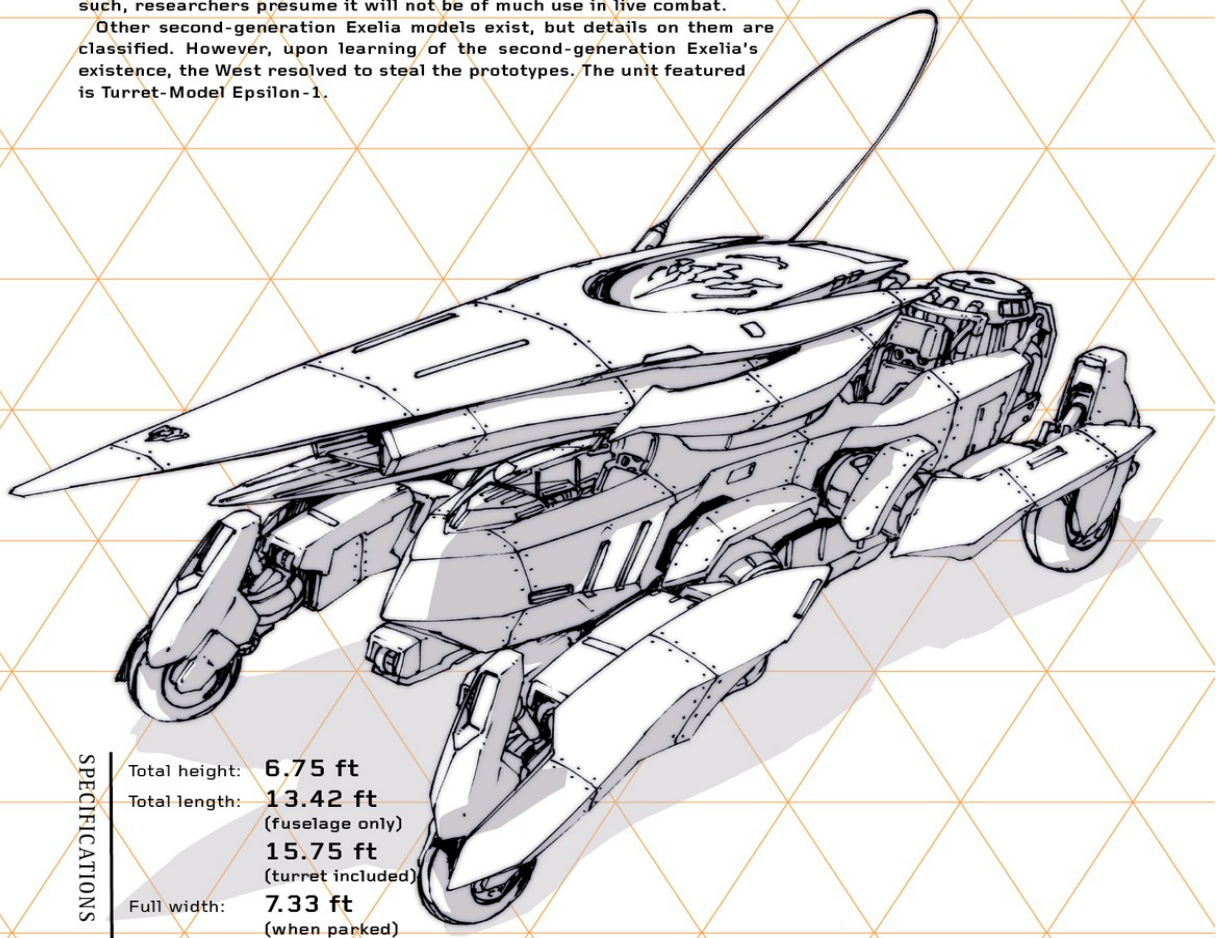
# EXELIA: EASTERN COUNTRY OF O'LTMENIA MODEL

## [SECOND-GENERATION TURRET-MODEL EXELIA PROTOTYPE ε1]

A second-generation Exelia powered by the flow engine that nuclear physicist Kreis Falman developed. It is still in prototype stages, so only a handful have been produced. Its sole armament is the turret at the center of the unit. The turret's defining characteristic is its ability to compress the massive amount of energy produced by the flow engine to fire a powerful heat blast.

Its usage of a turret puts it at odds with traditional Exelia design philosophy, which stresses decreasing weight over attaching weapons to the vehicle. As such, researchers presume it will not be of much use in live combat.

Other second-generation Exelia models exist, but details on them are classified. However, upon learning of the second-generation Exelia's existence, the West resolved to steal the prototypes. The unit featured is Turret-Model Epsilon-1.



SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| Total height: | 6.75 ft |
| Total length: | 13.42 ft (fuselage only) |
| | 15.75 ft (turret included) |
| Full width: | 7.33 ft (when parked) |
| Dry weight: | 962 lb |
| Engine: | metal-cooled in-line two-cylinder pulse-type flow engine of graimar nuclear alloy with 580 ps |

VOL. II

KEI UEKAWA

ILLUSTRATION BY
TEDDY

MECHANICAL DESIGN BY
NAOHIRO WASHIO

YEN ON
New York

# Copyright

May These Leaden Battlegrounds Leave No Trace: Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs, Vol. 2
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.
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-DANGAN MAHO TO GHOST PROGRAM-
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Bullet Magic whizzed through the air at supersonic speeds and hit mark after mark. Mages were used to that power, which created supernatural effects through the magic laced in their bullets. Their attacks transformed into phantasmal projectiles that pierced even armored weapons and downed them in but a single shot.

However, mages could also avoid such powerful attacks. They possessed an ability to predict the movements of those supersonic bullets—Qualia. An intuitive power that granted a mage the ability to "foresee" the future. Such powerful predictive future sight was unique to mages, and it helped them turn modern warfare on its head. Thanks to Qualia, special soldiers who could avoid bullets traveling faster than sound dominated the battlefield. War zones quickly became an uninhabitable space for the common man, so mages reigned supreme.

"Tch…"

One such young mage, Rain Lantz, strained his prediction powers to their limits. The trees surrounding him obstructed his field of vision. Unfortunately, wherever he ran, his Qualia alerted him to a possible deluge of bullets. And so, he rushed through the front lines as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Haaah, haaah…!"

He ran while his lungs screamed for air. Bullets zoomed overhead, nearly brushing against his skin. The places they hit burst into flame, but luckily, the shock waves were minimal. Rain continued his march, forcing his way through enemy lines. However, the very next moment…

"Ah…!"

…a shadow blocked his path. Something black rammed into Rain, and he knew something was coming.

*Danger…* Rain reflexively guarded his abdomen, but at that very same moment, something stabbed into him.

"Gaaah, aaah!"

He hit the ground and rolled around powerlessly. Rain tried to scramble back up, but intense pain kept his legs from moving right. And when he looked up, his consciousness cloudy, he saw…

"Shit…"

…a white uniform. A mage from the West. He'd been ambushed. Rain found himself unable to get up as the enemy soldier moved in to deliver the finishing blow.

*I'm gonna die…* That single thought crossed his mind. But…

"Seventy seconds."

…a cold voice crackled through his wireless transceiver. It seemed to belong to someone too young for a battlefield.

“Now, then. I suppose it’s time.”

The girl sounded surprisingly listless and casual given the circumstances…but she also sounded awfully familiar to Rain.

“Let’s correct this world.”

As soon as she finished delivering her message, everything warped.

“Ah…”

A sense of distortion and vertigo struck Rain. And the next moment…

…the world shifted.

# 1. A NEW EXELIA

“Gah, aaah!” Rain groaned loudly in pain. “Ugh…”

His five senses floundered, as if he’d been tossed around.

*It doesn’t hurt anymore…* All the pain and the injuries on Rain’s body from the prior battle had disappeared.

*……*

Though, the sensation of suffocation still lingered in his consciousness. Every single time he tried to inhale, pain tore through his lungs… It took him a while, but he gradually caught his breath. And when he finally raised his head…

…he found himself in a snowy field.

*This is…* Instead of a forest filled with gunfire, he found himself in a field of snow. Silvery white extended in every direction. Rain was currently in a mountainous region, so getting a proper read on the situation would be difficult. At least there were no enemy soldiers around him. And no friendly ones, for that matter.

He’d entered a world that had shifted…

Rain rode a ten-foot-tall armored weapon…an eastern M4 Exelia. Both the situation and area were different from his battle mere moments ago. He stood alone in that snowy field.

“I swear…”

No…he wasn’t alone. Someone sat in the Exelia’s front seat with their back turned.

“Rain,” she called his name languidly. “I swear, the moment I look away, you almost get yourself killed. Didn’t I order you to hold out for at least seventy seconds?”

“…Sorry.”

“Sheesh.”

That was the same voice that had spoken to him through his wireless transceiver earlier, counting down to the moment of activation.

“Well, you’re still alive, so I suppose all’s well that ends well.”

“…Where are we?”

“Not sure. I was also in the middle of the forest a few seconds ago, but here we are.”

Her long, silver hair and bright eyes of the same transparent color gave her an ethereal appearance, and yet she carried herself with a great deal of presence even against the backdrop of snow.

The girl combed down her hair, then said, “We’re probably pretty far from the earlier battlefield. There’s no one else around us.”

“Air, that Reprogramming just now…”

“That was me, of course,” said the silver girl, Air. “I used the Devil’s Bullet.” She was awfully casual about those fateful words. Then she turned to the south and said, “Honestly, they sent a great deal more troops than I expected.”

He had to look down to meet her gaze, but despite her dainty appearance, she spoke harshly to the taller boy.

“I might commend a rookie for surviving an attack from five mages for seventy seconds, but you’re still too weak to survive on the battlefield if that is all you can do.”

“…Understood.”

“If I had to grade your performance, I’d say you’d handle yourself all right against any ordinary mage. However, if we were to encounter a Ghost, you’d die with nothing to show for all your hard work.”

Air presented him with a rather bitter, harsh evaluation, but Rain found himself unable to argue. Everything she said made perfect sense.

The silver-haired girl was a Ghost, a being in possession of unimaginable power. Her silver hair and the two massive guns she carried on her back, which also served as her primary weapons, made her easy to spot in a crowd. However, her true power resided in the silver bullet only she could produce.

The Devil’s Bullet, it was called. Any person shot with one disappeared. And that meant more than just dying. All achievements, accomplishments, and results produced by that person got erased, leaving no trace of their existence. If one were to shoot a hero’s mother, that hero would disappear. And if the inventor of a weapon were to be shot, the world would shift to one where the weapon had never been invented.

Reprogramming… Air had given that name to the power that changed the world. And after gaining said power, Rain had used it many times. He’d gunned down officers who caused the death of many and enemy commanders who led great massacres, changing history each time.

This bullet that could erase a person and everything they’d done fell into the hands of one powerless boy, giving him the authority to control the world.

*I can change things. I can surely end his war…*

And yet—

“Well, all right,” Air sighed. “I used the Devil’s Bullet to pull us out of that losing scenario, but the fact is, we got whittled down to twenty percent of our armored units back there. I doubt we can win the next battle if we put up a similar showing.”

Even such an overwhelming power wasn’t almighty. Air reminded him of this as she brushed away the snow that piled over her clothes.

“Let’s wrap things up for today.”

*Dammit…*

In Rain Lantz's eyes, Bullet Magic was a weapon. It'd been nearly ten years since the fires of war had consumed his hometown, and he had since polished his technical and magical skills to ensure he would never lose the people he held dear again. Of course, he wasn't conceited enough to believe he could beat high-ranking officers. However, he'd still survived live battles time and again. Even in an academy that trained young mages, few matched him.

"Really, I'm all bark and no bite, aren't I…?"

Alestra Academy. A military academy established to train and promote young mages. Around sunrise, Rain and Air sat side by side atop the institute's western gate. No one walked near the deserted area at that time of day, so they often discussed things there.

"You sound pathetic," Air said, her words stabbing straight into his heart.

It'd been a day since their last battle, a local struggle in Jilen Woods. The West had maintained complete control of the situation until it eventually won, while the East lost one of its prominent internal land routes.

That was by no means a small loss. Losing a main logistic route in the middle of the war was the same as having an artery severed. Plus, the knowledge that they'd lost such a major battle dealt a bitter, crippling blow in its own right. The damage to morale would not soon heal.

The momentum from that defeat threatened to overwhelm them, which was why they had to win the prior day's battle, even if it meant suffering massive casualties. However, even the Devil's Bullet, which shifted the world, failed to overturn the results.

*Dammit…*

"This makes it four defeats in a row."

"…I know."

That battle wasn't an anomaly. All the ones Rain had joined over the past month had ended in defeat. In the few months since he'd gotten the Devil's Bullet, he'd rushed through many battlefields and used it to change the results…to change the world. He'd shot down many officers who caused tragedies, interfering with the past again and again to gradually guide the war to its conclusion.

Unfortunately, his enemy, the western country of Harborant, was a major power that had never allowed another country to encroach on its territory. Many powerful individuals inhabited its borders, so it easily augmented its forces enough to counteract the interference of Rain and the Devil's Bullet.

The power of the Devil's Bullet wasn't almighty. It wouldn't work without hitting its target, and that condition could be difficult to meet. And if said target didn't influence the state of battle enough, the bullet's effects would be minuscule.

The West mass-produced newer Exelia models and erected a powerful invasion force, which granted them an advantage the Devil's Bullet couldn't easily overcome. And as a result, O'ltmenia had suffered many defeats.

*What should I do…? Do I even have a next move to make?*

While Rain was agonizing…

"Hmm, what *should* I do?"

…it was clear that Air was not considering the matter at all.

"Thinking is just too much work!"

"…Hey," Rain said to her

"Oh? What do you want?" the silver-haired girl beside him responded moodily. "I-I'm not giving you any of my strawberries," she added as she hid the bag.

"I don't care about your strawberries."

"…You better not."

Air chowed down on the bag full of strawberries as she listened to Rain's musing. They were a rather rare, precious fruit during winter months, and from the moment she started eating them, Air's mood had improved significantly.

The prior day's battle had only just ended, so they met at the western gate to discuss the situation first thing in the morning. Air didn't seem the slightest bit tired, though. Quite the opposite, in fact. She idly watched the morning sun, her hand stuffed into the bag as her usually sour expression made way for a pleased grin.

"Still, quit looking so depressed. Moping around won't change the fact that you lost."

"It's better than acting all carefree."

"Guess you're the type to die first on the battlefield."

"……"

"Overthinking can be just as foolish as not thinking things through at all."

"Foolish…?"

"Well, whatever. Be depressed if you want. Luckily, I have a little tribute here," Air said while stuffing another strawberry into her mouth. Rain had received the bag of fruit a few days ago from his friend Athly, and he'd brought it to Air intending to share half. Needless to say, she ended up snatching the whole thing from him.

"Don't you have any more?"

And she even had the audacity to demand seconds, which he couldn't provide.

*Haaah…* Rain internally heaved a sigh. He felt exhausted. Thinking back, he realized Air always acted exceedingly arrogant and overbearing. A mere few months ago, Rain, a cadet on the battlefield, had nearly met his demise. But he had stumbled across a silver bullet, and when he used it, he met Air.

*Right…*

She’d called herself a Ghost, a being who continued to exist by feeding off the flames of war. However, before Rain even had the chance to refute such an absurd claim, he met other Ghosts like her.

*Ghosts…*

Forced into an extraordinarily dangerous situation, Rain had no choice but to fight.

And just like Air had said earlier, had Rain found another Ghost during that battle, he would have certainly died.

In order to maintain their souls, Ghosts spread war and conflict. They possessed immense, unnatural magic power, pressing the bounds of the concept itself. Fighting them had endangered everyone in the area, leading to much death and destruction. Many people had died, and many towns had burned, leading only to further sorrow.

Still, some things remained. A month ago, during his last battle with the Ghosts, Rain had formed a long-term partnership with Air. He still had that, as well as his temporary home, Alestra Academy.

They had a strange relationship, an unstable union that threatened to collapse at any moment. And yet, she remained by his side. She was one of the Ghosts. A silver mage who stood above all others, noble and full of pride and dignity. However, at her core, she was a fragile girl. She stayed with him through it all, even during the calm and casual moments outside the battlefield.

"We can finish this talk next time. It's cold out here."

In the end, Air made preparations to leave because she found the morning chill too hard to bear. She'd done nothing but chat and stuff her cheeks with strawberries, but that seemed enough for Rain. Thoughts of the future made him anxious, so he needed a change of pace.

"When's our next meeting, then?"

"Right, about that. I have some errands to run, so I'll be away for ten days."

"Ten days…?" A rather long period of time, in Rain's opinion. He wanted to talk things over sooner, if possible.

"Having some time to mull things over will help you."

"But our next dispatch is in five days."

"You should handle that without me. Remember, don't do anything reckless and get yourself killed, *if* you can manage that."

After that parting shot at Rain, Air disappeared.

Five days later, Rain arrived at his next dispatch point, Hazul Lake. Air, of course, didn't accompany him. It was an area along the border, with the lake at its heart, where the West frequently launched guerrilla attacks. The region contained an iron mine that was crucial for the East. If Hazul Lake ever fell into the West's hands, the East would lose a large source of iron, which was why they dispatched even cadets to defend it. But—

*This is bad…*

It had happened two days after Rain and his fellow cadets had arrived. For the first time in over a hundred days, a western strike force appeared near the lake. And it wasn't one meant for patrol or keeping the enemy at bay, either.

Fifty units… The West had invaded Hazul Lake with fifty Exelia units when each country only possessed a thousand or so in total. Their actions seemed absurd, but the enemy did it anyway. The East, in comparison, only reached thirty units by adding the cadets.

Thirty units were more than enough to hold any defensive line, but when the enemy brought fifty, they stood no chance.

It'd been an hour since the battle began, and while they'd tried to resist through conventional means, all their attempts had ended in failure. The western units rushed into Hazul Lake and crushed the eastern defenses with superior numbers, so the battle rapidly tilted in the enemy's favor. Bullet Magic rained nonstop from the enemy's sturdy formations.

“Dammit…” Rain ground his teeth in frustration as he watched the battle from the rear along with the rest of the cadets. They hadn’t joined the main force yet due to a lack of orders. If Air was there, perhaps he would have sneaked onto the front lines, but…

“Whoa… Another unit’s down…”

…she wasn’t by his side. Instead, his classmate Athly joined him in the Exelia.

“We’re going to lose this, aren’t we…?” she asked.

“We’ve already lost. Hell, we didn’t even stand a chance to begin with…”

“Ugh, can’t they just give us the order to retreat already…?”

She’d been his partner ever since they’d enrolled in Alestra Academy, and her skills as an Exelia manipulator were far beyond what one might expect from a mere cadet. But despite her talent, she still didn’t hold a candle to Air in any regard.

Rain refused to act, mostly because Athly didn’t know about the Devil’s Bullet. He had to keep that power a secret at all costs. Athly was completely oblivious, so he had no reason to act outside the scope of their orders for all she was concerned.

And so, Rain merely watched as the East fought a losing battle.

*At this rate, the battle will...* No. Even if Air were present, turning the tides seemed impossible. The gap between their forces appeared too large to overcome. And sure enough, eventually…

“Attention. All eastern forces aside from the second unit are to retreat downstream. We’re falling back.”

Major General Kobachi, who led Hazul Lake’s defenses, had concluded there was no point fighting any longer. That was the wisest, most prudent action given the situation.

The battle had ended in the East’s defeat. That seemed clear to everyone present.

However—

“All right, there’s that order to retreat. Let’s bail, Rain!”

“…Keep moving forward, Athly.”

“Huh?”

“Head for that rock fifteen hundred feet ahead.”

A lone cadet refused to accept that fact. While everyone else retreated, Rain fixed his rifle’s sights, removed the safety, and placed his finger over the trigger.

*At this rate, we’ll lose...* Over the past few weeks, the East hadn’t garnered even a single notable achievement. They’d simply faced one loss after another; any more and they were doomed. He had to change the battle, no matter the cost.

“U-um, Rain, they told us to retreat…,” Athly said, trying to deter him.

“Forget that!” Rain shouted.

“Ah…”

Intimidated by Rain's outburst, Athly drove their unit as he directed. Passing by units heading away from the front lines, they made their way toward Hazul Lake's northern end. That was no random charge, of course. He had a clear plan in mind.

*I've been observing the battlefield this whole time, but...* He'd analyzed the battlefield, even as he stood at the back, and managed to narrow down the enemy's chain of command. A group of several units that hardly moved stood in the middle of the battlefield, overlooking everything. If he managed to shoot the commander…

*Everything might change...*

He had a chance to shift the flow of the battle, but before they reached the rock…

"Ah…!"

Powerful Bullet Magic blasted Rain's unit from behind. The enemy hadn't scored a direct hit, but the blast still sent their unit flying. And when the dust clouds settled and Rain regained his vision, he saw Athly bleeding profusely from her head.

"Ugh…"

"Athly!"

"Oh, Rain… O-ow… I'm fine; a rock just grazed me…," she replied bravely, but it clearly looked like a more serious injury. Honestly, watching Athly's clumsy attempt to smile encouragingly through her pain tormented Rain.

"…Athly. Let's regroup with the rest of our forces."

"Roger."

Rain changed his order and made them retreat from the front lines, leaving another failure in his wake…

"Really, I'm fine. They said I'll need some time off, but they're blowing it *way* out of proportion."

After the two of them had retreated, Rain quickly urged Athly to receive medical treatment. Then, upon returning to Alestra Academy, she had been issued two days of bed rest in the hospital wing. Athly sat on a bed, her head covered in a bandage.

The only wound she'd suffered was a gash, but since it involved blunt trauma to the head, the doctor insisted she stay for observation.

Rain had arrived at eight in the morning, to which she responded with a giggle.

"They're not blowing anything out of proportion. You took a serious knock to the head."

"But they are… Still, having you come see me every single day like a doting wife makes it kind of worth it."

"I'm supposed to be *your* wife?"

"Maaan, I'm dying for something sweet."

"…I'll grab you something tomorrow."

“Yaaay! Oh, and good luck in class today. I’ll be taking a nice, long nap while you hit the books,” Athly said as she pulled the covers over her head. She joked around, but…

*Her wound still hurts.*

…he knew she was suffering. The huge cut was roughly sewn together, so it would be aching terribly the moment the painkillers died down. Even as she talked to him, her smile appeared shaky.

*…Why?*

Why had everything turned out so poorly? He’d gained the power of the Devil’s Bullet, but he still constantly lost battles. Plus, he’d even gotten his partner hurt.

“I’ll come visit you again later today.”

“Okaaay!”

Rain left the bedroom and headed for the lecture wing.

“Fuck!”

The moment he walked into an empty corridor, Rain expressed his frustration by kicking a wall. He knew he was throwing a childish tantrum, but he still failed to keep his emotions in check. A sense of irritation overwhelmed him. He hated that nothing went the way it should have… He hated himself for being so powerless.

*I’ll never change anything this way…* His patience was wearing thin. Anger consumed him before he realized he had to calm down.

“…Huh?”

Shortly after he said good-bye to Athly, Rain stepped into the lecture wing. He’d arrived late, so he expected everyone else to already be there. However, all the students huddled around the bulletin board, speaking excitedly.

“What now?” he sighed. Rain felt abysmal, but the sight still piqued his curiosity. And so, he sneaked a peek at the board that had a new sheet of paper plastered onto it.

*Third-year student Rain Lantz of the mathematics division, please report to my office immediately.*

*—Alestra Academy Chairman Kreis Falman*

“What’s this all about?” Rain mumbled to himself as he walked down the hallway. He noticed his classmates staring at him curiously. And they weren’t just sneaking peeks, either. Upon noticing his presence, they turned to him and outright stared.

*Ugh…*

The reason was clear. The message on the board addressed him personally, and the one who called him was the chairman, the highest-ranking official in Alestra Academy. This was extremely unusual.

*Why call for me…?*

Alestra Academy was the largest officers’ academy in the country. It produced those who served as the core of the military but also contained

many people affiliated with research institutions. While the latter counted as military personnel, some of them had never even held a gun. They were fewer in number compared to orthodox soldiers like Rain, who accounted for a little less than 60 percent of the student body. Most were younger than Rain, too; though, some researchers were middle-aged men.

There were non-degree courses established for such researchers. Some of them focused on practical warfare, like the Exelia manipulator's course, but most, such as the mechanical engineering department, were desk jobs. Despite that, all departments required cadets to take practical training and some general knowledge lectures until they reached their third year. The true split into majors only began in the fourth year, which meant third-years were still treated as general students.

*But a summons, huh?*

Rain stopped in front of the chairman's office, which was on the first floor of the annex building, a place people rarely visited.

*I wonder what she wants with me…?*

He felt extremely nervous as he gazed at the ebony door that had a note on it that said NO NEED TO KNOCK, but he still had to go through with it.

"Pardon me," he said as he opened the door and walked in as per instructions. The moment he did, Rain wrinkled his nose. It was a fairly large room, but the chairman's office was filled with paperwork and the distinctive scent of fresh paper.

*Ugh…*

There was also the volatile smell of alcohol from the ink, common in places full of paperwork.

"Ugh…"

"Groaning the moment you walk in is rather rude, don't you think?"

Rain turned toward the one who had spoken.

"I mean, sorry, but…," he apologized awkwardly.

"Good grief, you've truly become an impolite student, haven't you? I must say, you were far more well-mannered as a first-year. You used to bear it with just an uncomfortable smile."

"I feel like that was rude enough, to be honest…"

"Well, I thought your awkward reaction was cute."

After that, a woman in a military uniform poked her face out from behind the mountain of paperwork.

"It's been a while, Rain."

When Rain had first met her, he thought she looked to be in her forties, but rumor had it she was a decade older than that. She was a fairly attractive woman with a slender build. If it weren't for the eight medals and golden rank insignia on her rack, anyone would have assumed she was an ordinary senior officer…and most would have refused to believe she was the chairman of the biggest officers' academy in the country.

Rain simply stood up before the uniformed woman who'd summoned him.

“So what is your business with me, Major General Kreis Falman?”

Major General Kreis Falman was a female officer who had been promoted to the position of chairman two years ago. She was originally the instructor for the mathematics division, where she worked on Exelia development, but she was pushed up after the previous chairman passed away. The promotion was a grand achievement, but Kreis never sought fame and mostly lamented the extra work that had dropped onto her lap.

“So if I may ask again…” Rain trailed off as he closed the door, then continued. “What’s your business with me?”

“Oh, nothing in particular.”

“…Seriously?”

“You’re not in a hurry to get anywhere, are you?”

She motioned for him to take a seat on the sofa and poured him a cup of cold tea. In an effort to act polite, Rain took a sip, while Kreis sat opposite him, sipping on equally cold tea.

“……”

“……”

However, silence fell.

“Um…”

“What is it?”

“I know it’s rude to say, but I’d prefer to cut the small talk and get to the main topic.”

“Impatient, aren’t you? Well, if that’s what you’d prefer, I can accommodate.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you having fun at Alestra Academy?”

More small talk. Had she ignored his request?

“Listen, Rain, this is important to me. Only three people enroll in mathematics each year, so you’re one of the rare few. Up until you were a second-year, you often showed up to help me with research, but I haven’t seen you recently, which worried me.”

“The promotion means I get dispatched often.”

“How dreadful.” Kreis’s reply was a condemnation of the war as a whole.

*Why do all this…?* Rain failed to understand her reason for summoning him.

Kreis Falman was one of the few people Rain had known since entering Alestra Academy. He majored in mathematics, which had very few new recruits, and Kreis was his instructor at the time, so he’d gone to her for guidance.

There weren’t many students in the mathematics division, but that was because only those with outstanding grades could join it. Kreis stood head and shoulders above the other instructors, and so, her lectures and advice had felt extremely valuable. She was quite kind and well-spoken. Rain honestly thought her a woman of character, in a way unlike most senior officers, so he viewed her as one of the few trustworthy adults he knew.

He'd helped her with her research whenever possible, which had resulted in them growing rather close.

However, that had all ended one year ago. The war grew fiercer, with battles breaking out on all fronts more frequently, so their time together diminished. Kreis herself didn't have much leisure to speak to a student, either. She had her duties as an instructor, the chairman, and a researcher to attend to.

Now she had called him over out of the blue but danced around the issue. Nothing made any sense, including her questions. She went as far as using the bulletin board to call him over, so he assumed she had urgent business, but that seemed wrong.

"Hmm…" Kreis likely realized how impatient Rain seemed and said, "All right, then. There's something I'd like to ask you, Rain."

"Go ahead."

Her cup, which had remained in her hand the whole time, suddenly shook.

"Isn't it hard to be around the Ghost, Air?"

The very next moment…

"Ah!"

…Rain pulled out the pistol holstered at his waist and fired a bullet in Kreis's direction. It was neither silver nor did it contain any Bullet Magic. It was just an ordinary bullet, a standard projectile made of lead that couldn't have missed at that range. However…

"Ow…!"

…*Rain* groaned in pain the moment he fired. The bullet aimed at Kreis's shoulder missed its mark and buried itself in the wall behind her. Someone had stopped it…and it wasn't Kreis. She wasn't a mage, so she had no way of keeping up with him. The one who protected her was…

"Well, color me surprised."

…a girl hiding in the shadow of the bookshelves.

"I wondered how you'd react, but I didn't expect you to just up and shoot her."

"Air—"

He failed to even ask what she was doing there. The moment he took a shot at Kreis, Air had shot Rain's right hand. She hadn't penetrated the bone, but his dominant hand was still screaming in pain. She'd fired a blank, but it dealt enough damage to render him speechless.

"You have a knack for doing the most unexpected things, you know that?" Air whispered as she walked out of her hiding place and looked down on Rain with clear exasperation in her eyes. He had no problem with that, though. The real problem was…

"Air, why…?"

…Air had saved Kreis.

"Why, indeed…?" The girl sighed. "Answering that is going to be a bit of a headache…"

Kreis looked taken aback. The two of them had different expressions on their faces, but they exchanged familiar glances.

“Um, can I ask you something, Air?”

“What?”

They conversed naturally, as well, which implied they had at least met before.

“I thought I heard a gunshot just now, but what happened?”

“This panicky little blockhead just tried to shoot you.”

“What?!”

“I know you’re not a mage, but at least pick up on that much…”

Based on how they talked to each other, Rain developed a theory.

*They…know each other?*

They’d most likely met multiple times already, since they seemed like more than just casual acquaintances.

“What’s going on?” Rain asked. Air had watched him from the shadows in the room without his knowledge, which implied she had some sort of personal connection with Kreis. However, the circumstances behind it remained unclear. And so, Rain turned his gaze to Air, who sat down on Kreis’s table with her arms crossed.

“Look, I *really* don’t get all this,” he said.

“And you think you deserve to know? Presumptuous, much?”

“Just explain the situation already!”

“I first met Kreis forty years ago,” Air said, answering his question. “During the third war, to be precise.”

“The third war…?”

“Right, the last great war before this one. I leeched off O’ltmenia’s ground forces at the time, while Kreis was a cadet… I think this girl was about your age back then. She served as one of my subordinates. That was our relationship.”

*From back during the third war…?*

Air called Kreis, a woman in her fifties, *this girl*. It was hard to believe an apparent teenager like Air would use that term to refer to someone so much older than her. But considering their relationship, that made perfect sense. They’d known each other for forty years. Back then, Kreis was indeed a girl, while Air looked the same as ever.

“…Major General Kreis.”

“Yes?”

“I’d appreciate it if you could stop beating around the bush and explain why you summoned us. I highly doubt you’re here to reminisce over tea.”

“Oh? And here I thought you’d be a bit more interested in my relationship with Air.”

“Frankly, I am, but I doubt that knowledge will change anything.”

“I see. In that case, Rain Lantz, I have an order for you,” Kreis said, swiftly changing the subject. She’d finally reached the matter at hand by

calling it an order…something a soldier couldn't ignore. Then she spread a few sheets of paper over the table, presenting them to Rain.

"I want you to escort a transport headed for the capital that's carrying our second-generation Exelias."

The words Kreis had just uttered, *second-generation Exelias*, shocked Rain. That was a machine that would set the trend of battles to come.

"This is my order as chairman, Rain. Since you've helped with my research, I shouldn't have to explain the details. It's the unit I've been developing for decades," Kreis said, then turned her attention to Air. "Air, do you recall hearing about it?"

"I've heard some rumors but have never seen the real thing," Air replied, then looked up as if trying to fish the right words from memory. "Second-generation Exelias are new units that run on an entirely different mechanism than the current ones."

"Yes, that sums it up well enough," Kreis responded before turning her gaze back to Rain. "Right now, Exelias use reciprocating engines. Many aspects of the machines have evolved over the past century, like the structure of their legs and the many measures taken to reduce weight and elevate maneuverability. But on the other hand, the main mechanism that powers Exelias has barely changed. They're all the same in the sense that they use organic fuels… However, second-generation Exelias use an entirely different mechanism altogether. The flow engine I've developed makes the decay heat of graimar nuclear alloy its energy source, allowing for a more potent weapon."

The classification was simple enough. First-generation Exelias used reciprocating engines that consumed gasoline for fuel, while second-generation Exelias used a flow engine that employed the decay heat from graimar nuclear alloy.

Kreis Falman's thesis was "Graimar Nuclear Alloy's Radiant Heat." She instructed mathematics but only because it related to her true field, nuclear physics. And through her years of research, she created the flow engine used in second-generation Exelias.

Extracting a great deal of energy from graimar nuclear alloy wasn't new knowledge in and of itself, but it released too much decay heat, and no one knew a way to control its output, so people deemed the flow engine an impossible dream. Even if one were to build such an engine and equip it onto a second-generation Exelia, they had no way to regulate its energy output. Thus, second-generation Exelias did not exist…until now.

"We've only developed a handful of them, but they're pretty much complete. Their performance isn't exactly ideal, however, so they're prototypes unfit for live combat. Problem is, the units themselves are loaded with state secrets, including the flow engine. We can't let them get stolen, no matter what."

"Why…?" Rain faced Kreis directly and questioned her at that point. "Why have me escort that unit, then?"

“Allow me to be direct. I want you by the second-generation Exelias’ side as my spy. The flow engine is like a child to me, and there are even people on the East’s side who are after the technology. But you, Rain, are different.”

She’d made a rational choice, then.

“I know about your relationship with Air.”

“……”

The fact that he’d teamed up with a Ghost was a large enough secret to hide, but something else worried Rain more. Did Kreis know about the Devil’s Bullet? Hiding the existence of a bullet that erased others entirely was of paramount importance. If knowledge of the Devil’s Bullet leaked, it would spell the end for Rain and Air. The risk of someone else knowing was too big to simply ignore.

“Unfortunately, unlike you two, I’m not a mage, so I can only watch battles from afar. Who knows what special powers you have?”

“You mean the Ghosts’ bullets…?”

“Ghosts’ bullets?”

“…It’s nothing.”

Based on her tone, Rain realized Kreis did not know of the Devil’s Bullet. She simply knew of the mysterious existence of the Ghosts and that Rain was helping Air. She understood that he was closely involved with a Ghost—that he had a special relationship with an entity capable of influencing the flow of history.

“I can’t entrust this mission to someone who can’t keep a secret.”

That explained why Kreis had selected Rain. He understood that.

“Major General Kreis…I’d like to decline.”

And that was why he turned her down.

“Care to elaborate, Rain?” Kreis asked, seemingly confused.

“I’m not fit for an escort mission. There are more important battlefields for me, so I refuse. I simply don’t think we have time to waste considering the state of the war.”

“…You’re saying that transporting second-generation Exelias safely is a waste of time?”

“Frankly speaking, yes,” Rain replied in a curt tone, but there was no emotion in his response. He’d made his decision after careful deliberation. He understood the truth better than anyone else, after all. He’d helped Kreis with her research over the last two years, and as an engineer, he knew the importance of second-generation Exelias. He knew how realistically viable and important it was…or rather, how nonviable and unimportant it was.

“I don’t doubt that the technology of second-generation Exelias is important, but because we prioritized theory over advancing technology, it’s unusable. I don’t see how escorting it will influence the war.”

“Perhaps it won’t have an immediate effect, but we’re close to perfecting it. Can’t you take that into consideration and realize the importance of this task?”

“By then, the war will be over.”

“……”

“The East is teetering on the edge of defeat at this very moment. And there are battlefields we have to fight on, outcomes we have to change, right before our eyes. If we focus on protecting the second-generation Exelias, this country will die.”

In Rain’s eyes, the whole matter was about priorities.

“We need to win the upcoming battles. That matters more than anything else.”

Rain didn’t deny the fact that developing new technology was important. How could he when technological advantages had helped the West take control of the war? However, at that point, they didn’t have time to waste on it. If they focused on developing new technology, the country would definitely lose the war before that research bore any fruit. Things were simply that bad.

It’d been four years since the fourth war began, yet the end was already approaching. Both countries had suffered massive damage, but the West had taken the wheel and steered the war toward their victory. They wouldn’t let such a chance pass them by.

The time for preparations had long since passed. If the East didn’t fight, the country would die. Taking that into account, escorting a prototype unit felt very low priority. Especially for Rain, who had the Devil’s Bullet and held the greatest potential to turn the tides. An escort mission simply was not where he belonged.

That was his honest take on the matter.

“Dispatch me to the next major battlefield instead,” Rain advised. That felt like the ideal course of action after analyzing the situation. But then…

“Why are you acting so impatient?”

…a cold voice chastised him. And it hadn’t come from Kreis, either.

“Air…”

“You’re free to run off and die if that’s what you truly want, but have some pity for the lives you’ll take down with you,” said the girl of silver, her posture perfectly relaxed.

“What are you saying?” Rain asked as he moved his gaze to Air, who sipped on Kreis’s tea with an exasperated expression.

“Do you have any clue what you’ve been like lately?”

“I do.”

“Then why do you keep losing battles?”

“That’s…”

He couldn’t have done anything. He wanted to tell Air those battles felt hopeless, but that sounded so much like an excuse that he couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because you never had any chance of winning those battles. They were all lost causes.” Air voiced Rain’s exact thoughts. “Your last four battles ended in defeat. And I’ll level with you, Rain. None of them were fights you should have taken. And do you know why that is? Because they were all losing battles. I shouldn’t have to tell you that, though. You know that better than I do. Or am I wrong?”

“……” Rain found himself unable to respond.

“Sure, the power I granted you is great, but it’s not omnipotent. Turning around a battle you have no chance of winning is impossible. It honestly feels like you think you can turn the tides yourself without considering any outside factors.”

Rain was surprised to hear this from Air. She had never given Rain advice thus far. She may have given him answers when he asked for them, but she’d never stepped up to offer them of her own volition.

*……*

Rain hadn’t actively chosen his battles due to the emotional impatience that had overtaken him. When he’d first started using the Devil’s Bullet, things had taken a quick turn for the better. However, since he’d been throwing himself into battles with low prospects of victory, no new hope had taken root.

He had no way to win every single battle. That was just a mathematical inevitability. But as his losing streak continued, he felt more and more desperate to achieve something. He couldn’t even tell how rashly he was acting. Emotions he had no way of controlling dulled his judgment, so he threw himself into hopeless battles.

*And I even got Athly hurt…*

“You should take some time off to cool your head. And this escort mission you seem to think is some kind of simple package delivery might be the perfect chance. Right now, you’re just moving blindly and at random. You won’t change anything like this.” Air provided perfectly sound advice, but it failed to resonate with him.

*Why…?*

“Why are you being so complacent?”

“Huh?”

“So, what, are you suggesting that I just kick back and relax while we keep losing?”

“That’s not what I said,” Air replied calmly.

“No, that’s exactly what you’re saying!” Rain screamed at her, clearly losing his grip.

“It *definitely* isn’t. Quit sulking like a little kid. And don’t you dare put words in my mouth.”

“See, you *literally* called me a kid.”

“Stop that!” Air snapped back at him, scratching her head in irritation. “I’m telling you that picking fights you can’t win because of some delusions of grandeur is suicide. You’re not looking at the bigger picture, Rain.”

“So, what, I should do nothing?”

“Ugh! God, you’re annoying!” Air shouted.

“But that is what you mean, right? Sounds to me like you’re telling me to just stay put.”

Rain sounded even angrier than Air. Her words carried a particular nuance, a particular weight to them in his mind. They challenged his core beliefs. Rain had subconsciously assumed that having the Devil’s Bullet meant he had to fight more than others, that he was the most important soldier in the East. And so, her words touched on a nerve.

It felt like she’d said he didn’t matter. From an outside perspective, he sounded extremely childish. Air’s words made sense given the situation, after all. But he shut her out and refused to listen.

“…Fine,” Rain flatly stated. “If you say that’s the best course of action, then I’ll escort the second-generation Exelias. But whether it’s successful or not, nothing will change.”

And with that said, Rain rose to his feet. There were still things he probably needed to ask, but the irritated boy simply snatched the documents that contained the escort mission’s details and left the chairman’s office, slamming the door behind him.

Two individuals remained in the room.

“Well, I’ll admit I was a little shocked when he shot at me all of a sudden,” Kreis said, breaking the silence after a while. Then she looked behind her and gazed at the bullet hole in the wall. The slug was still lodged in there. “I’d be dead if not for you, Air.”

“I will say I’m not surprised he did that,” Air answered, to which Kreis sighed.

“I always saw him as a little taciturn, but he seemed like a sensible, intelligent, and kind boy… To think he’d even shoot his own teacher to protect the secret of the Ghosts.”

“Are you shocked?” Air asked.

“Honestly, yes,” Kreis replied. Then, after a short pause, she added, “Are you really fine with this, Air?”

“Hmm? Well, in any other situation, I’d say he did the right thing by shoot—”

“That’s not what I mean,” Kreis cut her off in denial. “I’m talking about you.”

“What?”

Rain shooting her wasn’t the issue.

“I’m trying to ask why you haven’t killed that boy already?”

“Ah…!” Air gasped and stiffened involuntarily.

“You gave him a stern lecture about how he’s failed to see the bigger picture, but I’d say you’re in the same boat. That boy, Rain Lantz, is far too inexperienced to work with you. True, he’s head and shoulders above cadet level, and even I can’t tell how much he’ll grow over the next five years, but at present, he’s a bad fit for a powerful Ghost like you. If you keep giving

him more power than he can handle, he'll lose control sooner or later. You know that better than anyone, right?"

Forty years ago, Kreis had worked alongside Air, who'd manifested as a Ghost during the last war. She'd occupied a role both similar and different from Rain's. Air had integrated herself into the military's very heart, while Kreis was below even a rank-and-file soldier. They had a direct relationship as commander and subordinate, as well as a common goal to strive toward.

Frankly, their relationship felt rather cold and mechanical, but it did eventually yield great results. And that was why Kreis questioned her. "You're going to have to make a choice, Air."

She didn't miss Air's signs of weakness, and she moved in to correct her. A commanding officer's mistake could get many people killed. She knew that very well from personal experience.

"It's perfectly clear that Rain is impatient because he's lacks maturity. You managed to rein him in this time, but what if he refuses to listen to reason again? Is he truly worth getting you and your soldiers caught in the crossfire of his hubris?"

"……"

"How many times have you hesitated to pull the trigger in this situation, only to regret it later?"

"That's…"

"You should kill him as soon as possible."

"I keep trying to tell you…," Air started to speak again but failed to finish her sentence.

Kreis noticed. "You often let emotions sway you." Despite her gentle and kindhearted demeanor, she continued coldly, "That's why I called Rain here today. I had to judge if he's a suitable partner for you… At this point, he only barely passes. I'll admit, Rain matters to me, too. He's a student of mine. I've watched him grow over the years, so he almost feels like my own child. But I can say the same about other soldiers, too. The battlefield is full of Alestra Academy alumni. If I had to pick between all of them and Rain, I'd discard Rain without a second thought."

Thus, in her mind, the boy who'd succumbed to the power had to die.

"How many times will you repeat the same mistake, Air Arland Noah?"

Unfortunately, Air had opened her heart to him once, so she found herself unable to make that decision.

"I know; I get it…"

Rain's mindset had shifted. If left unchecked, he would self-destruct and involve many others in that catastrophe.

*I know that. And yet…*

"You know I'm right, but you still can't do it, can you? Well, if you want, I can arrange for it to happen…"

"I said I get it!" Air cut her off with a shout.

"Shouting and pretending you didn't hear me won't change anything," Kreis replied quietly.

“Seriously, just shut up for a second…”

“I didn’t want to have to say this, either. I don’t want to have someone I know killed, much less a student of mine… But can you imagine how many people will be sacrificed if you hesitate?”

“I know. Really, I get it, I do. When the time comes, I’ll…”

The girl said she’d do it, but her words lacked conviction.

*What the hell are you doing…? You promised we’d fight together…*

All she could do was call his name in her heart.

*Rain…*

## 2. QUARREL

Rain joined the escort mission for the second-generation Exelias. They were dispatched by train to a mining town called Baran, which was located on the northern end of O'ltmenia. It would be a single ride along a 120-mile line that extended from the center of the country, and the estimated travel time was six hours. Rain had been forced onto the train at six in the morning without any prior knowledge of his fellow cadets' involvement.

"There are two spots that are especially dangerous."

The cadets stood in the cargo compartment. The six dispatched students all listened closely to a person with a large, hulking frame…Orca A. Dandalos.

"The first point is a place we'll reach in an hour, the Levant Plains. It's our territory, but it's a pretty rural region, so it'll be hard to detect any soldiers that are lying in wait, making it the perfect spot for an ambush. The second is the Lemina Mountain Range. It's a dangerous area for a very simple reason… It's connected to western territory."

Those were the two potential spots the West could attack. They'd loaded five dummy units camouflaged as second-generation Exelias even though they had no way of knowing if the West was coming to raid the train. But they needed to be prepared for all possible scenarios, since their priority was to protect the cargo.

In terms of personnel, they had twenty-four standard soldiers and six cadets, for a total of thirty men. But considering that all of them were mages, there were more than enough to guard one train.

"All right, so about our postings… Rain and Athly are on watch, so you all can just kick back and relax," Orca informed them in an official capacity.

Since it was a single six-hour ride, they didn't have to take shifts. As such, they'd decided to make two cadets handle their share of watch duty. They'd used coin tosses to pick from among them, and Rain lost after choosing heads four times in a row. Athly, however, volunteered despite coming out in first place.

"Here, Rain. Your wireless transceiver."

"Thanks."

"Let's try to get these six hours over with."

He took the transceiver from Athly. It was a small, portable, high-fidelity model for military use. After that, the two of them headed for their post.

"Whoa, it's cold!" Athly yelped.

"Well, this *is* a snowy region…"

They walked out of the car. Beyond the door, they saw scaffolding meant for the scouts. It offered a good view of the area around them, but the temperature was well below freezing. Sitting outside the train felt taxing, yet they had to do it for six hours straight.

"You sure about this?" Rain asked as he eyed the transceiver Athly handed him. "I think this'll be a pretty annoying job."

"Hmm, well, I wouldn't have volunteered if you weren't stuck out here."

"But you haven't recovered from that head injury…," Rain stated out of concern.

"It's been four days. I'm fine, really." Athly casually brushed off his worry.

An hour passed. They didn't talk too much, since they'd tried to focus on their duty. But then…

"You know, we…," Athly whispered.

"What?"

"We haven't really hung out much lately."

They were outside a moving train, so the noise felt pretty intense. However, since they sat shoulder to shoulder, Rain heard her clearly.

*Huh…?*

"What do you mean? We hang out every day back at Alestra Academy," he replied.

"I mean, yeah, but we used to go to town by car or sneak into the labs to steal gunpowder, remember?"

"We played some pretty dangerous games back then…"

"Things sure have changed, huh?" Athly whispered to herself, full of nostalgia. "And it's not just us, either. Everything around us is all different now. Including our environment."

"Well, yeah…," Rain answered in agreement as he sneaked a glance in her direction. Athly, on the other hand, didn't turn to look at him as she spoke. She'd fixed her gaze outside of the train, sticking to her role as a scout.

*What's gotten into her…?*

Something about her words felt out of place. She usually spoke clearly and refused to beat around the bush. She hated the use of subtext with a passion. And yet, she was being extremely vague about this. Her gaze was constantly downcast, and every now and then, she started speaking as if she suddenly recalled something. She'd say something incoherent, then stop. She'd been acting like that since they'd left the station.

*What's wrong with her…? Maybe it's just one of those days?*

Rain didn't speak much, either, so another hour passed in relative silence. The train ran into zero trouble over the two-hour journey, so they headed into the Levant Plains according to schedule.

As he'd been informed ahead of time, there wasn't a single house or paved road in sight. The only man-made structures in the area were the train tracks. Still, according to their intel, it was one of two likely ambush

points. There were no obstacles in the area, making it a prime position for armored vehicles and tanks.

Rain left Athly to her strange mood and focused on keeping watch. The snow that had fallen since early dawn had stacked up to two inches on the ground. The whole area had been dyed white. It made Exelias especially noticeable, which was helpful, but visibility was still low due to the poor weather.

Rain squinted to better focus on his job. However, that made needless thoughts circulate through his mind.

*"You should take some time off to cool your head."*

Air's words from the other day echoed within him.

*"You're not looking at the bigger picture, Rain."*

But even after he'd taken time to mull over what she'd told him…

*Shit…*

…he didn't regret what he'd said. Impatience spurred him forward, leaving no room for anything else. The words she said simply rolled around in his mind. Worse yet, his thoughts kept running in circles, which had distracted him. If any enemy troops had approached them, they would have been in trouble.

"Attention, cadets."

Rain jerked upright. Those words crackled through his transceiver. It was a message from the commanding officer in charge of the escort mission.

"We're almost out of the Levant Plains. Has anything changed on your end?"

"N-no, nothing." Rain spoke into his transceiver as he looked around hurriedly. "We've spotted nothing out of the ordinary."

"Good. Well, once we're past these plains, we should be in the clear for a good while. Rest up for the latter half of the trip."

The transmission cut off after he delivered that remark. They'd gotten an order to rest, which would never have happened in a real emergency. It seemed the commanding officer didn't think the train would be targeted by the West, either.

There was no telling when the second-generation Exelias would be ready for practical use. Plus, the probability of someone stealing them during such a short journey was low. Rain felt justified in his thoughts that the whole affair was a waste of time, a fact that annoyed him all the more. He had no time to waste when he had far bigger, more important battlefields to use the Devil's Bullet on.

"We'll contact you again in another twenty minutes, as per schedule."

"Roger."

Rain looked up at the sky and ended the transmission, still stewing in his irritation. However, since he wasn't focused on the task, when he moved to put the transceiver back into his pocket, its reception antenna…

"Ngh…"

…grazed against Rain’s cheek. The thin metal rod prodded him hard enough to hurt.

“Ouch…,” he groaned, then pressed his hand against the pain in his cheek, only to find blood.

*Ugh…*

It bled quite a bit. Apparently, the cold air had made his skin brittle, so the antenna had ripped through his cheek, leaving a single, clear line across it.

*…Well, shit.*

He had no luck at all. The wound itself was no big deal, but it was also completely unnecessary and thus especially frustrating.

*Why now…?*

His agitation flared up. It was just one bad thing after another. However, Rain realized he had to focus on stemming the bleeding.

*I need something to wipe this off...* Rain reached into his breast pocket to pull out a handkerchief, then brought it under his face. But…

*Huh?*

…at that exact moment, a slightly warm sensation graced Rain’s cheek. And it wasn’t the warmth of his own blood, either. Something warm, moist, and vividly alive, the polar opposite of the antenna from earlier, touched him.

The contact that pressed against him was gentle. And when Rain turned his face to the left in surprise, he found Athly’s face right next to his.

“H-huh, what…?”

“Oh, hey…”

Rain appeared flustered, but the same couldn't be said for Athly. She gazed straight at him with a red fluid on her lips—the blood that had dripped from Rain's cheek.

"Rain…," Athly mumbled his name as her lips drew close enough for him to feel her breath. They had already sat close enough to each other for their faces to touch, so pressing her lips to his cheek was easy.

"Um, uhhh…"

Rain failed to grasp why she would do such a thing, while she simply remained silent. However, he understood that she was trying to convey something. Her face, which rested right before his eyes, appeared full of doubt and impatience.

*What's that supposed to mean…?*

Rain directed a probing gaze in her direction. What did she wish to tell him? Whatever it was, it wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision. She clearly wanted to tell him something important.

*Why this, all of a sudden…? No…*

It wasn't all that sudden. She looked nervous but not flustered. She'd obviously prepared herself. Athly had intended to speak her mind from the moment she'd volunteered to join him on watch.

Come to think of it, during his last battle with a Ghost, Athly's hometown burned to ash and she lost her parents. She'd been out of it ever since. Rain thought her reaction was natural, since she'd just lost her home *and* family. However, the way Athly acted on the train didn't quite gel with that analysis.

*What is she…?* What was Athly trying to say? What was she hiding?

Rain's heartbeat pounded noisily in his ears. And after a few moments of mutual silence, she finally spoke.

"Um, about last month…"

"Last month?"

Last month was when her parents died and the unusual flurry of events surrounding the Ghosts took place.

*I knew it…*

Athly wanted to tell him something about it

"Did something happen back then?" Rain asked, prompting her to continue.

"…Yeah."

She'd gone to the trouble of creating a chance for them to speak alone, so she knew nothing would move forward unless she spoke her mind. A few more moments of prolonged silence passed before she raised her voice again.

"I…," Athly muttered, her shivering lips still smeared with blood. "I know about you."

"Know about me? What do you mean?" Rain asked, looking extremely confused.

“About you and that girl,” Athly replied before falling silent. She said that as if she found the topic difficult to discuss, but *that girl* wasn’t nearly enough information.

Rain waited for her to continue and clarify who she meant. However, just as Athly prepared to say the fateful words that would change everything…

“Rain, you there?”

“Ah…!”

…someone banged hard on the door he was leaning against. The voice of their class prefect, Orca, boomed around them. They planned for no shift rotations, so he was probably here for Rain himself. Rain wanted to tell him to come back later, since his talk with Athly felt far more important. However, Orca spoke before Rain.

“Sorry, Rain. I need some help.”

Unfortunately, the interruption deferred his conversation with Athly far into the future.

Rain peeked through the room’s window and let out a fairly simple response.

“Ugh… Yikes.”

A chill air filled the room. Rain found himself reflexively recoiling and taking a step back. Orca had led Rain to the seventh car’s cargo compartment, which contained more ordinary cargo. All ordinary cargo on the train was split between different compartments in a twelve-car formation, while a lone forty-by-sixty-five-foot space was allotted to the cadets.

*Why is it so tense in there…?*

The air felt like lead. Charged lead, at that. Rain wondered if someone had scattered poison into the area, even though he knew that hadn’t happened. Another peek into the window told him all he needed to know. His classmates sat squatted down, hugging their knees, and at the back of the room…

“……”

…Rain spotted a girl who looked *extremely* annoyed. She wasn’t making any kind of noise, nor was she thrashing about angrily, either. Instead, she simply sat there with the single most bitter expression imaginable, sulking silently. Her finger twirled her silver locks as she quietly polluted the room with negative energy.

It was, of course, Air. The Ghost girl had killed the mood.

“Rain.”

“What?”

“You’re the one who pissed her off, right? Go fix this,” Orca ordered. However, Rain didn’t have the first idea how.

*Why me…?* Rain felt perplexed. Air looked upset, but she normally played the part of a cheerful, adorable girl at Alestra Academy. It was all fake, of course, but her acting had bought her devoted fans among the student body.

*What is that idiot thinking…?*

That only made it all the more pronounced when her mood suddenly soured. The sheer discrepancy kept anyone from reaching out to her.

Rain and Air shared a secret no one else knew, but they didn't hide the fact that they were close enough to chat regularly. They talked to each other if there was ever any need during school hours and went to their respective classrooms to call each other if any urgent business came up. They figured that acting too distant might actually rouse the others' suspicions and eventually make it harder to act freely, so they decided against it.

Unfortunately, because they often spent time together, everyone assumed only Rain could talk her out of a bad mood. Air put on that cheerful charade to smooth out her relationships with other students. But while her acting was masterful enough, it also created a sort of barrier around her that made her hard to approach.

Air had many friends, but she didn't really let anyone into her heart. That was why no one dared to talk to her when she showed uncharacteristic anger. Instead, they called on Rain to calm her down. No one knew the truth behind their relationship, but everyone at least thought that Rain and Air were real friends, which explained why they blamed Rain for her mood.

"I've got nothing to do with this." Rain shook his head and denied any involvement.

"Well, if you're not the reason, why's she so upset?"

"Just leave her be. No need to poke at her."

Rain didn't understand why Air was so upset. He really didn't. Sure, they'd argued the other day and never cleared the air, but that couldn't have affected her.

*Air would never…*

In his mind, Air never got mad. She never lost control of her emotions like normal people. She was different from the rest, a Ghost who'd died a century ago. Someone like her couldn't have been upset by a spat with a common cadet.

In Rain's mind, Air was too special, too unique for that. And so…

"Hmm. You sure you're not to blame?"

"I am."

…he failed to truly understand her.

"Well, okay." Orca seemed convinced by Rain, but as he nodded, he turned to face the door. "Then lemme rephrase the briefing for you."

"Huh?"

"Go cheer her up. If things get any worse in there, someone's gonna die."

"What? I just said no," Rain argued. However, Orca refused to listen.

"In you go!"

"Ah…!"

He grabbed Rain by the arm, opened the door, and shoved him into the room. It was all so sudden that Rain found himself stumbling toward the source of the oppressive aura before he could try to resist.

"……"

"……"

Air actively ignored his entry. Everyone else in the room looked at Rain with expectant glances. *Finally, someone who can fix this!* However, Air didn't focus her attention on him or even ask the obvious question *What do you want?* or anything along those lines. And that made it clear she had a bone to pick with him.

"So it *is* his fault."

"It's all because of him."

"What did he do?"

"Did he cheat on her with Athly?"

"Wait, didn't he cheat on Athly with her?"

Rain heard people whispering whatever absurd rumors came to their mind, but he didn't bother trying to set them straight.

*Guess I've got no choice…* Rain bitterly accepted his task.

"Air, we need to talk. Can you come with me for a sec?" he asked in an attempt to move somewhere more private.

"What do you want?"

That was the first thing she said when they arrived in the adjacent compartment. Her sullenness was now joined by her usual curtness.

*…Right, so what* am *I supposed to say?* Rain still didn't know how to approach her. *Guess I should apologize first…? Wait, no!* It was a simple solution, but why should he do that when he'd done nothing wrong?

*Even if apologizing will fix everything…* In his mind, she didn't deserve one. He still felt he was wasting his time on this escort mission. That hadn't changed. Which meant he couldn't come up with anything to say to Air.

"……"

"……"

Silence.

"……"

"……"

The seconds ticked away. Rain had to come up with something to say, since he'd called her away, but he had nothing particular in mind.

*What do I say…?*

Eventually, Air broke the silence.

"…Aren't you supposed to be on watch?" she asked. Air had probably realized exactly what he'd been thinking.

"…Athly's taking care of it, so we should be fine."

"Okay."

"We're running along a snowy cliff right now, so I doubt the enemy will attack here."

"True. We're most likely safe."

“Yeah.”

The conversation quickly died.

“……”

“……”

More silence followed, and an awkward atmosphere settled between them. Ever since she’d entered the compartment, Air had her arms folded and chin cocked upward in her version of a sulking gesture. Rain had gone to the trouble of calling her over, so she probably assumed he wanted to apologize. But he said nothing, so they both simply fidgeted awkwardly as more and more time passed.

Rain considered trying again but quickly decided against it.

*Why should I?*

The stubborn belief that he’d done nothing wrong kept his mouth shut. Air, on the other hand, made no attempt to hide her pure, unfiltered anger. Talking was pointless. It honestly felt worse there than in the other room, since they were all alone.

“Can I open the window?” Rain asked.

“What’s the window got to do with it?”

“I need some fresh air.”

“Oh, sure,” Air replied absentmindedly.

Rain opened the compartment’s window as if to physically clear the atmosphere.

*Ngh…*

He looked outside as he wondered what to do next. The train was running along a rail built against a snowy cliff face, with a steep rock formation on their right and the cliff on their left. The cliff was over 160 feet tall and had a forest beneath it. If anyone fell off the train, they wouldn’t escape unscathed.

When he pulled the rusted window open, a snowy breeze blew into the room. They were traveling at forty miles per hour in bad weather, so it was pretty chilly. Still, Rain didn’t close it right away because the moment he looked up…

*Huh…?*

…he spotted something. It had appeared over the snowy cliff.

*Seriously?*

He’d only seen it for the briefest of moments, but he thought he saw it hide in a gap in the snow.

*What the hell is that…?*

He hadn’t imagined it, either. Rain definitely saw a black shadow.

*…Are we in danger?*

Some foreign object hid amid the snow. However, the cliff was far too steep for a human to stand on it, let alone a machine. The snow had only piled up as high as his knees, too, so no one could’ve concealed themself at a moment’s notice.

*Maybe I'm seeing things 'cause Air's stressing me out right now…* However, right when he seriously began considering that option, his vision went dark. The pure white snow disappeared, as if someone had turned off the light.

"Huh…?"

However, that wasn't what confused Rain.

Silver armor appeared before his very eyes—but that was impossible.

*What the hell…?!*

An artificial, inanimate mass with four legs appeared above the train.

*No way!*

An Exelia had suddenly popped out of thin air and plummeted downward, leaving them no time to react.

"Ah…!"

The next moment, an intense shock wave ran through the compartment. And the loud blast of wind soon followed.

The Exelia that appeared out of nowhere had landed atop the train.

*What the hell is an Exelia doing here?!*

It simply wasn't possible. A tank that needed to move across level ground couldn't have hopped onto a moving train. And yet, the silver Exelia had appeared in the air and used gravity to tear through the train's roof.

Debris flew in every direction, and a cloud of snow and mineral dust blocked Rain's vision.

"Whoops," said a voice that belonged to neither Rain nor Air.

And even with the noise of a train hurtling forward at forty miles per hour, the sound of that girl's whisper reached Rain's ears all too clearly.

"I thought I picked an unoccupied car, but I guessed wrong."

She was wearing all black.

"A pity, I'll admit."

She sat atop a western AT3. However, she wasn't simply an enemy soldier who'd swooped in for a surprise attack. Something felt terribly *off* about her.

*What…? What is she?*

The word *black* didn't do her clothes justice. They were darker than tar, a shade that didn't reflect light at all. It felt entirely different from the faint black of O'ltmenian soldiers like Rain.

The woman's waist-length hair only added to her strange appearance here. Her unusual outfit and accessories only added to her distinct, jet-black impression.

However, what truly stood out most was the sword she held in her left hand.

*…A sword? What the hell? Why?*

Uniquely curved swords were indeed used as service weapons by the West, but Rain had never seen anyone carry them around in battlefields where Bullet Magic reigned supreme. They were mostly reserved for formal wear during festivities and official rites.

Swords had no practical use in the face of Bullet Magic. And yet, that girl of darkness carried one like it was her main weapon.

*She's...* Rain intuitively knew that this was the shadow he saw on the snowy mountain. Thus, her identity didn't matter. If he didn't take her out right away, she would doom the occupants of the train. His Qualia blared at him like an alarm bell. She was *extremely* dangerous.

*Ah...!* A chill ran down Rain's spine. His body shivered in fear. But he simply pushed those emotions aside and sprang into action. An enemy soldier had launched a surprise attack against them, so he had no other option. Capturing her alive or sparing her was too risky. He had to end her life here and now.

*I have to shoot her!* Rain whipped out his handgun and fixed it on the eerie girl of ebony standing against the white background.

"Wait!" A voice shouted at Rain to stop. "Rain, don't! Get away from her!"

It came from Air, and she sounded panicked. She must have realized just how much power the ebony girl had.

*Shut up...* Unfortunately, Rain decided to ignore her advice. The other day, she'd told him not to fight—to reject his entire reason for living. Hearing her say it again spurred on his immature, rebellious spirit.

Rain trained his sights on the ebony girl and shot a silver bullet to erase her existence.

*Just disappear. I'll erase you, here and now!* He ignored Air's warning and attacked, oblivious to just how outmatched he was.

*Ah...!*

A freezing chill struck Rain. Something… Something felt awfully, inexplicably wrong. Mages had Qualia, a sixth sense that allowed them to foresee the immediate future in order to detect danger. Thanks to that ability, they often avoided threats with a single step. And yet, Rain had just reflexively stepped forward.

It was an entirely unconscious action. Even Rain didn't understand why he'd done it.

"…You just reacted," a voice said from *right behind him*.

"What…?"

"You're no ordinary mage."

Whoever was speaking was close enough to touch him. The pilot of the Exelia in front of him had suddenly appeared behind him with her sword…

"I tried to stab your heart, but I missed."

…a weapon that should never have seen any use in battle…

"Gaaah, aaah…"

…was buried directly into Rain's left breast, stabbing through his lung and ribs.

"Aaah, gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The moment Rain realized what had happened, pain rushed through his body. She'd missed his heart, but she'd still pierced his lung and abdomen.

The pain he felt in that moment was worse than all the injuries he'd ever suffered combined.

*Wh-what the…?!*

What had just happened?

*I can't tell… What did she do?!*

His thoughts disappeared into a sea of red. Confusion overwhelmed him. Nothing made sense. Not the moment he'd been stabbed, not the logic of how it could have happened, not the method with which the girl had suddenly appeared behind him. All of it felt utterly incomprehensible.

"It's a shame I have to kill you here. But in war, young, talented soldiers always disappear like bubbles in the ocean, so…if you must resent something, resent this terrible era we live in. Save your rage for this conflict…"

With that said, the girl tightened her grip on the sword's handle. A single twist was enough to drive the blade into Rain's heart. However, right when she prepared to deliver the killing blow…

"Ah…!"

…an explosion rocked the train, and a torrent of flames burst from the floor beneath them.

# 3. THE WOUNDS ONE BEARS

Rain gradually regained consciousness, stirring from the damage inflicted by the shock wave.

*……*

His field of vision cleared, and his hazy mind started to focus.

"…Ugh," he groaned as he opened his eyes.

*What's going on?*

Cold white stretched out as far as his eyes could see. Rain had fallen onto the snow. The moment he tried to get up, intense pain shot through his left breast in the exact spot the mysterious girl had stabbed him earlier.

*Aaah…*

The sword was still buried in his chest.

*Goddammit…*

His upper body felt awfully heavy. The steel…the sword…was weighing him down, impaling him back to front. The sword had slowed the bleeding, so removing it would have spelled his doom. And so, Rain had no choice but to get up with the sword still in his chest.

*Where am I?*

He was no longer on the train. The white snow and tall trees around him told him that he stood in a forest. And there was no one else but him in sight. He'd landed on an uninhabited, snowy mountain.

Burning, smoking pieces of wreckage and what looked to be man-made debris were strewn about. Rain assumed they were the remains of the train car. There were more pieces of metal around than he could count, sending billows of black smoke into the air.

*What happened…?*

How had he ended up there? As soon as Rain started questioning the situation…

"Rain!"

…someone called his name. Of course, he remained utterly alone, but he hadn't imagined that voice. Someone had called for him.

"Rain, are you there?! Can you hear me?!"

"This voice…"

The distorted sound came from his waist, from the wireless transceiver Athly had handed him when they began their watch. Rain recognized that tinny voice instantly.

"Athly…"

“Rain!” she screamed, sounding mightily relieved. “Thank God. I’ve been calling you for so long with no response…”

“What…?”

“Hmm?”

“What happened…?”

The fact that the transceiver still worked was a stroke of luck, but he didn’t have the time to rejoice. Understanding what was going on took precedence.

“Well, part of the train got bombed and slipped down the mountain.”

“Wait, what?”

“Three cars in the middle of the train fell down the cliff, taking their cargo with them. The couplings were severed to protect the rest of the train, but the three cars around the epicenter couldn’t be saved…”

Apparently, they’d all tumbled straight down the cliff.

*Climbing up is probably not an option…*, Rain thought as he looked up. He stood below the cliff face he’d been looking down from a short while ago. The incline looked to be over sixty degrees, which made climbing up effectively impossible.

The snowy wind picked up, obscuring the top of the cliff. Still, the rails were *definitely* behind that curtain of white. Rain knew that was where he’d fallen from.

*So that’s what happened…*

That explained the wreckage around him. The train car’s frame had probably shattered during the fall. Rain had likely lost consciousness partway down. He could easily have died in the crash, so sheer dumb luck had saved him.

“Anyway, the rest of us are unharmed because we were in the other cars, so they told us to continue the escort mission. Once we figured out you were in one of the fallen cars, we tried to contact your transceiver…”

Everything clicked into place during Athly’s explanation.

“Rain, are you all right? The people in charge said they’d send a rescue party soon, but that fall must have really hurt you.”

“I’m…fine. You’ve got nothing to worry about,” Rain lied to her. “I’m not hurt.”

He had nothing to gain by telling Athly about his injury. It would just make her worry unnecessarily.

“I’ve got a handle on the situation now,” Rain answered. An injured soldier would only serve to slow down the rest of the pack.

“I think I’ll…stay put and wait for the rescue party. Just focus on guarding the cargo. That bombing from earlier was caused by a western soldier. More of them may be preparing to raid you.”

And with that, Rain cut off the transmission. Normally, he would have left the transceiver on, but he had to keep his injury a secret. If he talked any longer, his pained panting would give him away.

*Aaah…!*

The moment he stopped concentrating, pain jolted through his body. He placed a hand over his chest, and sticky blood clung to his fingers. Athly said a search party would be sent to rescue him, but he was in the middle of the mountain, and the snowfall was severe. It would take them quite a bit of time to find him.

*Will I last in this cold weather until they do…? Of course not!*

He would either bleed or freeze to death. He couldn't afford to wait for a search party.

*Dammit…*

Regret washed over him. He'd been such an idiot.

*What happened back there…?* Rain thought back to his confrontation with the girl of ebony who'd ambushed them with an Exelia. He'd tried fighting her despite not knowing anything about her.

*"Wait!"*

Air had tried to stop him, but he'd ignored her.

*Quit acting like I can't do anything!* he'd thought, and like a child he'd refused to heed critical advice.

*"Rain, don't! Get away from her!"*

He'd ignored her…and his stubbornness had landed him here, at the brink of death. The car he'd occupied had tumbled down the cliff, taking his gravely injured body with it.

*Shit…*

A wave of regret struck him once more. He hated his own foolishness. Air understood everything. She had always tried to guide him with the right words throughout the transport mission. Rain had assumed the West would never attack and treated the whole thing as a pointless chore. But they'd sent in a mage powerful enough to dispatch Rain in the blink of an eye. That was proof the West was gunning for the new Exelias.

It still seemed like an unpredictable turn of events in his mind. But back then, if he'd remained calm and stopped when Air had warned him… perhaps they could have protected the train. Perhaps he could have avoided that life-threatening injury. Perhaps he could have stayed with the rest of his unit.

He realized how childish he'd been acting. Air had even told him as much when they'd argued.

*"It definitely isn't. Quit sulking like a little kid. And don't you dare put words in my mouth."*

When she'd called him a kid, Rain's anger had boiled over. But looking at where that uncontrolled anger had gotten him, the word felt generous. He was an utter fool.

*Something…*

There had to be something he could do. As bad as things were, dying while drowned in his own regrets seemed far worse. He tried to focus and come up with a solution. He had no way to take back his mistakes, but he

could at least not make them worse. And so, he attempted to gather his thoughts.

*Right now, I'm at the bottom of the cliff with a sword stuck in my chest. I need a way to get back up there…*

Unfortunately, right when he started thinking about possible solutions…

"Wow!"

"Ah…!"

…an ominous voice reached his ears.

"So this is where you landed."

He lowered his gaze to the western soldier who'd attacked the train.

"How…?"

"You still have a sword in you even after you fell from that height, but you survived. You must have amazing intuition as a mage. Or perhaps it's just luck…? Well, not like it *really* matters."

"What are you doing here…?"

The girl from earlier did nothing.

"No need to be alarmed. I don't intend to gobble you up or anything…"

Her black clothes were damaged. She must have fallen off the cliff, just like Rain, but she stood on the snow without a scratch on her. Was she completely unscathed?

"I have some business with you," she said. Then she instantaneously closed in on Rain.

"You see, I only have one sword."

Faster than he could draw his gun, the girl circled around him and…

"So I'm afraid I'm going to have to take this back."

…reached for the sword.

*No way…!*

She drew the sword out of his chest in one swift, flowing *squelch*.

"GAAAAAAHHHH!"

It was just as painful as when she'd first stabbed him, and he had to fight to keep from losing consciousness. But the experience was about to get even worse…

"Try not to scream. I'd rather you not burst my eardrums."

The girl thrust the muzzle of her gun, a small pistol best used for assassinations, against Rain's wound. The barrel soon turned red with blood.

"But it will hurt."

She pulled the trigger, and Rain experienced a sudden burst of white-hot agony, like molten iron pouring through his entrails and into his whole body.

"Gaaah—AAHHHH!"

"It's only surface-level treatment, but this should at least seal the wound."

It wasn't an attack, nor an ordinary bullet, but Bullet Magic. The projectile was laced with magic that condensed heat. The bullet cauterized

Rain's wound in the blink of an eye, reaching temperatures hot enough to melt iron.

*Wait… She stopped…my bleeding?*

It was an extremely crude form of first aid, but it saved Rain's life all the same.

*But…why?* Rain failed to understand her intentions. What did she have to gain by keeping him alive?

Right when such thoughts crossed his mind, she slipped behind him and grabbed him by the wrists.

"I need to tie your hands."

Rain was in too much pain to resist. And on top of that, the girl seemed rather skilled. She took a strap of leather used by the military for restraining prisoners and coiled it around Rain's wrists, then tightened it to bind his arms.

"Well, what do we do now?" she wondered aloud once she finished.

"…What?"

"Got something to say?"

"What…or who are you?"

Rain didn't understand anything about her. What was a dainty girl who seemed to be his age doing on the battlefield? Why did she raid a transport train? Why did she stab him, and…why didn't she finish him off?

"Do you want to know my name?" the ebony girl asked. She held her sword with the snowy mountain behind her and told him without a hint of hesitation. "I'm Deadrim, a soldier of the West."

With the field of white around her, she was eerily beautiful.

"Killing you here would be easy," she stated flatly before moving to make a proposal—or, more precisely, to start a negotiation. "Honestly, in any other situation, I'd abandon an enemy soldier like you, but I can't exactly afford to do that right now."

"Huh…?"

"Look up."

Rain gazed up as instructed, but he didn't see anything. A white void stretched out before him. He then looked around and realized his field of vision was extremely limited. First, there were the trees, and the snowfall only grew stronger as time went by. The situation already felt worse than when he'd first awoken.

"Can you see the problem? It's freezing cold, and the snow won't stop… The way things are going, even a healthy person will freeze to death within the hour. And unfortunately, I haven't been trained to survive on snowy mountains, so I assume an active soldier like you is better at this than I am."

Essentially, she wanted him to lend her his knowledge. To cooperate with her until they found a way off the mountain. In exchange, she would spare his life.

“I honestly didn’t expect this, either,” Deadrim said. “I planned to simply steal the cargo and run, but my ally probably fell off at the same time, so I have to find him.”

And so, she wanted Rain to accompany her. Of course, this was more of a threat than an offer. Rain couldn’t afford to say no. She could have killed him if he refused, but that wasn’t the only danger he faced. Rain was gravely injured, and if left alone, he would freeze to death.

*No… Even if I do help her…* Deadrim always had the option of killing him the moment he finished serving his purpose. She was a soldier who belonged to the enemy nation’s military, after all. Rain’s life had effectively been placed on a timer the moment the girl came up with the idea of using him to escape the snowy mountain.

*Still, I have no choice…* For the time being, he had to cooperate. Given his injury, Rain was useless in battle. It was an unbalanced deal, where his life rested entirely in Deadrim’s hands. But so long as he clung to life, a chance to break free still existed. Thus, he prioritized staying alive.

“Well, what do you say? Will you help me?” Deadrim pressed him for an answer.

*As if I can say no…*

“I have an idea,” Rain said.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Even if we get off the mountain, we’re in the middle of nowhere. There are no settlements in a twenty-five-mile radius. Plus, we won’t get far in this snow without any gear. We can try if you want, but we’d just die.”

“What, you want to wait for the snow to die down?”

“That’s also too dangerous. We don’t know when that will happen, so waiting without any food or equipment isn’t an option.”

Everything was stacked against them. And having arrived at that conclusion, Rain proposed what struck him as the best possible solution that also prolonged his life.

“The car we were on probably crashed nearby. Let’s go look for food and any machinery we can recover.”

They had to travel along the cliff to find it, which raised the chances of running into her comrade. Rain and Deadrim were thrown off, so the car hadn’t fallen directly where they were. Still, it couldn’t have crashed too far from their position, which made their search radius one mile at best.

The snow severely impacted their visibility, but not enough to obscure wreckage. And so, they started their trek with Rain walking ahead.

“That girl who was with you earlier…”

“What girl?”

“The one on the train,” Deadrim whispered, her gun fixed on Rain’s back menacingly. “She looked *extremely* white… No, *silver*. She was tiny and innocent-looking enough, but she didn’t hesitate to drop the whole car down the cliff in that situation. She has grit, as well as the marksmanship skills to back it up. I know we’re enemies, but I have to admit, she has skill. She

used her Bullet Magic to pinpoint the coupling and safely blow the cars off the rails. Seeing tactics like that on a modern battlefield surprised me."

As she talked, she confirmed his suspicion that Air had caused the explosion.

*Figured as much…*

Enemy soldiers had no reason to blow up the train in that situation. If they wanted to knock it off the rails, they could have simply sniped it from a distance. The only reason they'd charged in personally was because they didn't want to damage the cargo.

Air had apparently figured that out within moments and shifted into action, even when the enemy held all the initiative. She'd sought a way to keep the enemy away from the train, accurately gauged their skill, and elected to blow their car off from the rest of the train.

At first glance, it seemed like a reckless solution, but considering the presence of an Exelia, her choice felt rational. If she hadn't gotten rid of the attacker right then and there, the whole train would've been in danger.

The West had sent in only a single unit, which meant they were confident that was enough to complete that raid.

*……*

Rain had witnessed a rather odd sequence of events. The Exelia had fallen down from above, but it hadn't jumped. The massive unit simply landed atop the train.

*It appeared out of thin air…*

The phenomenon was physically impossible. A cliff face stood on the right end of the train, while a steep 160-foot mountain rested on the left. An Exelia couldn't have driven through that terrain, and yet here it was.

*There's something…some sort of trick to it.*

His assailant, Deadrim, had done something impossible. And until he figured out how it worked, he couldn't afford to make any reckless decisions.

"Stop, please," Deadrim said suddenly while he racked his brain.

Rain froze in place.

"I smell smoke," she remarked.

And indeed, upon taking a deep breath, the stench of smoke filled Rain's nose. Based on the wind's direction, the smell came from north of their position.

The two of them followed it and discovered the charred, smoking wreckage of the train car. However, someone had planted themselves right in front of it.

"Oh…"

Deadrim grabbed Rain's bound arms and lifted them up. Rain's face contorted from the strain on his chest and the injury in it, but Deadrim held on to him tightly, preventing him from so much as stirring.

"It seems we both have hostages," Deadrim flatly stated as she fixed her gaze forward.

“I didn’t expect this,” a female voice replied.

Two people stood before Rain. One of them was a soldier clad in the West’s uniform with faint scarlet hair. He appeared to be in his thirties, and blood stained the bandages around his leg red. And standing right behind him was…

“We both had the same idea.”

…the silver girl, Air, with her gun trained directly at him. She had fallen down the cliff, too, when the car flew off the rails. Her situation mirrored Deadrim’s, down to the fact she took an injured enemy soldier prisoner.

“You’re the mage who raided the train,” Air said as she faced Deadrim.

“And you’re the eastern soldier who derailed us. Your name?”

“Air,” she replied curtly.

“Hmm. Well, I’m Deadrim, a soldier of Harborant. Now, then, Air…” She paused and trailed off there before continuing the tense negotiations. “…I’m certain you’ve noticed the weather. Fighting in this blizzard will only result in us both freezing to death, and I don’t think either of us wants that. We should instead focus on securing the cargo.”

There was no point fighting. No matter who came out on top, the victor would meet a frosty death. Cooperating gave them a better chance of escaping alive.

“I suggest we work together,” Deadrim said. She proposed they begin by exchanging hostages.

“Very well, then.” Air accepted Deadrim’s offer without setting any further demands. A second later, she made the captured western soldier walk forward.

“Go on, you too.” Deadrim shooed Rain away and kicked his back, which prompted him to walk forward even though his hands remained bound.

“……” Rain silently stepped forward. After walking thirty feet, he crossed paths with the soldier Air had captured. It was hard to tell what he looked like through the snow, but like Rain suspected, the man was a commissioned officer. He had a certain frail, timid air to him that made it hard to believe he’d stage a raid.

*Yeah, like I thought…* The raid was likely the ebony girl’s idea.

“Hey there.” The blunt greeting came, of course, from Air. She faced Rain, who had walked all the way over to her without even realizing it. “Show me your wound.”

And that was what she chose to start with. He listened to her and shifted his torn clothes as soon as she freed his hands. Upon looking at his closed wound, Air immediately realized its severity.

“…The bleeding has stopped, but that’s it,” she whispered plainly. “The wound itself hasn’t healed at all. It’s pretty deep.” Rain’s selfish actions had caused all sorts of trouble, but there was no anger in her voice. She calmly, rationally analyzed the situation. “We should cooperate with them for a while.”

Apparently, she’d picked up on his silent question. “What now?”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to work with enemy soldiers?” Rain found himself questioning her decision. Sure, he’d worked with Deadrim earlier, but only at gunpoint.

“It probably isn’t, but we don’t have much of a choice. Before you two showed up, I looked over there and found the train car,” Air remarked as she pointed northward. “And there’s an Exelia inside it.”

“…No way.”

“A second-generation Exelia, to be precise. A prototype is inside that car.”

Deadrim and her partner had offered to work with them, but they definitely planned to betray them at some point. Rain was sure of that fact. After all, Deadrim had only spared him because she needed him. Taking an enemy soldier captive was nothing but trouble, so she would’ve planned to dispose of him after he’d served his purpose.

Even now, they only cooperated outwardly. On the inside, Deadrim was desperately searching for a chance to shoot them through the heart.

“Not that we’re any different,” Air remarked. “We’re in dire straits here.”

That went without saying. They’d been placed on the back foot the moment the car got knocked off the rails. Instead of outnumbering the enemy on the train, they got stuck in a one-on-one on the mountain, which placed them at a disadvantage.

Normally, the irreversible shift from a superior position to a worst-case scenario would have been lamentable. Any ordinary mages would’ve had to work to slowly improve their situation. Luckily, they weren’t normal at all.

“We still have a way out of this.”

Even in the face of impossible odds, they had one option. The very same power that had helped them return from the most perilous battlefields still dwelled within them.

“Good thing we have our ace in the hole.”

They had one final option that no one else had. A choice that had the power to turn the scenario on its head, to change established history by erasing the root cause…

“We can use the Devil’s Bullet.”

Air reached into her breast pocket and pulled out a silver bullet. It gleamed faintly, nothing like standard ammo. The bullet contained great power that allowed it to overturn any advantage, to change the very fabric of history.

“Think about it. Who mounted that raid? Who stood in the center of that operation? Whose *absence* would benefit us the most in this scenario?”

Two enemy soldiers had attacked the train, but the injured redhead obviously wasn’t their target. He was but an ordinary mage, so he surely wasn’t in charge of that operation. The correct answer was—

“Deadrim. That’s what that mage called herself,” Rain replied.

Air then turned her gaze toward their target and whispered, “Getting out of this situation is simple enough. We need to completely *erase* the person in charge of the raid. If not for her, we would have completed the escort mission safely. So let’s make that ideal scenario a reality.”

The wind picked up as she spoke, but it didn’t drown out Air’s voice.

“We will erase Deadrim’s existence with the Devil’s Bullet. That is our objective during this superficial partnership. Assassinating her should get us out of this.”

“Interesting.”

Five minutes had passed.

“It really is unlike any other unit I’ve seen.”

Rubble covered the fallen cargo. The car’s fuselage had exploded, reducing it to a burning wreck. Air used her Bullet Magic to blow off the larger bits of debris, while Deadrim used her sword’s grip as a makeshift handle to move smaller parts aside.

*Rumble, thud!*

*Rumble, thud!*

Rain tried to help, but every time he applied any kind of force, a rush of pain jolted his chest and brought him up short. In the end, Air and Deadrim removed all the rubble on their own. And upon clearing it all away, they found a most curious machine.

“Have you ever seen a unit like this, Air?” Deadrim asked.

“You know I can’t answer that question. It’s classified intel,” Air replied.

It was a massive mechanical monstrosity, the new Exelia model Rain and the others had to guard. However, like Deadrim said, it looked entirely unlike any other Exelia. It felt so different from the clunky all-purpose models Rain often used. Its exterior had a streamlined, aerodynamic shape, and the structure of its skeleton and legs appeared far more slender. But there was something far more odd.

“It looks like the type of tank they used before Exelias were invented…,” Rain mumbled.

The enormous turret at its front looked large enough to fit a person inside. The machine eschewed the Exelia’s design philosophy, which stressed making the vehicle light. It had been constructed with no regard for the modern era’s conventions.

The presence of this unfamiliar unit could only mean one thing.

*It’s a second-generation Exelia prototype…*

A new model that made use of a flow engine to supply massive amounts of energy.

*I’ve seen it a few times already, but…*

Its developer was the nuclear physicist, Kreis Falman, who had put all the East’s advanced technology together into a machine the West wanted to steal. Any would-be thieves needed to be eliminated by its guards, a rule that all involved understood.

*Yeah, this is the supposed new face of war…*

It was a new model designed to turn the tides of the war. But in that situation…

“Can we even move this thing?” Deadrim asked.

“If nothing else, we can use it to keep ourselves warm…,” Air responded.

…it served as little more than a stove.

Air hopped into the manipulator seat and turned the key to start the flow engine. Meanwhile, Deadrim slid a finger across the engine’s exposed parts. No sound of metal clicking against metal rang out. And yet…

“Oh, it *is* getting warmer!” Deadrim exclaimed.

“Guess we don’t need to worry about freezing to death.”

…the engine loaded into the back of the vehicle emanated heat. It worked. Unlike older models, the throttle didn’t make the engine suck in air. Instead, an electrical current started the nuclear alloy’s decay.

It didn’t produce any hot exhaust, so it didn’t have any temperature regulation technology inside, either. Luckily, as the flow engine heated the vehicle, they could just touch it to help retain their body temperature. The second-generation Exelia became a precious source of heat in that frozen ravine.

Air then tried moving the machine’s legs, which gave her little trouble.

“It seems this unit is called the Turret Model.”

“Turret Model?”

“I found a manual in the equipment compartment, and that’s what it said.”

Air found some documentation in the manipulator’s seat. It said this was a Turret-Model Exelia and confirmed that it was indeed a second-generation prototype.

*A Turret Model…*

Rain was involved with the second generation’s development, so he had some knowledge regarding the machine. Second-generation Exelias made use of the flow engine, which granted it additional functionality older models lacked.

The one before them was the Turret Model. The design philosophy ran against that of older Exelia models, where the mage was the one who handled the firearms. Instead, it came with a single large tank turret. It absorbed decay heat with the flow engine, condensed it, and used it to create a heat cannon stronger than anything a mage could muster.

Operating it appeared simple enough. All one had to do was press the steering switch. And firing the 30-caliber heat cannon was just as simple.

“Should I fire it once to check?”

They decided to activate it once at Air’s suggestion, since it was best to always test potential weapons. She followed the instructions to the Exelia attack.

“I’ll try shooting down a tree,” Air said. Then she pulled the trigger. And the moment she did, the tree she’d targeted exploded with a deafening sound.

“Ah…”

The explosion rattled their eardrums. The massive tree splintered and caught fire, burning blue—it was reminiscent of a Bullet Magic, Voldora.

*I see…*

The turret was as powerful as Bullet Magic, yet any trained person could use it.

*Yeah… I get how this weapon will change the battlefield.*

Even the strongest mages were held back by limited stamina and mana, but a machine could keep up a consistent sequence of attacks. It could fight far longer than any human. But with functionality that mimicked Bullet Magic—

“Huh. Is that it?” Air whispered. “This second-generation Exelia is pretty plain.”

Rain thought the same thing. Sure, being able to fire a bombardment of that magnitude without a mage was groundbreaking and had practical applications. But when one examined it more closely, it became clear that this only added to something that already existed. A single unit with this capacity had no hope of changing the state of the war.

“Well, at least we’ve got a nice, hot stove,” Rain replied.

Air and Rain didn’t investigate it any further and moved on…but they knew only 1 percent of the Turret Model’s true capabilities.

They moved forward in single file, electing not to stay still. The flow engine’s energy was by no means unlimited. They still had to escape the mountain before their source of heat depleted, lest they freeze to death. Deadrim didn’t object to that decision.

They could only hazard a guess, but the enemy faction most likely wasn’t going to send any reinforcements. Rain and Air couldn’t afford to wait for the search party to arrive, either. The blizzard narrowed the chances of being found, so they needed to escape on their own.

“Not a single opening…,” Air remarked. She and Rain actually had something else in mind. They didn’t intend to escape the mountain through conventional methods. That was merely a lie they told Deadrim and her partner.

“Even you can’t find a chink in her armor?”

“Well, if I try to watch for an unguarded moment, she’ll pick up on what I’m doing.”

They had one objective… Shoot Deadrim with the Devil’s Bullet and Reprogram the world. That was why they had chosen to cooperate with her and share one Exelia.

“It’s such a tight squeeze…”

“Well, obviously. This seat was meant for one!”

Rain and Air had to sit in the manipulator’s seat together. The Exelia’s front seat was for the manipulator, while the back one was for the gunner, and each of them only fit one person. In that regard, it was no different from the older models. It was only meant for two people, but four could cram

themselves in if necessary. And so, they decided that each seat would be shared by soldiers of the same country.

"Rain."

"What?"

"You smell like blood. It reeks."

"Can you cut me some slack? I have a literal hole in my chest…"

Since they shared a seat meant for a single person, Rain had to spread his legs and Air had to squat in the space between them and grip the steering stick. Thankfully, her petite frame allowed her to fit in snugly enough. It was still uncomfortable, and the closeness made it impossible to hide anything.

Rain's injury was severe and hadn't truly closed. He smelled like blood, which meant—

"You're still bleeding," Air said.

Rain averted his gaze to slightly below her head and looked at his chest. A red stain soaked through his clothes. His wound had reopened, and blood was seeping out of it.

"…At some point, we should stop to take a closer look at it."

Remembering the Lemina Mountain Range's topography from the mission briefing, they headed northwest. They could only roughly estimate where they fell, but they knew they would find themselves on a wide-open plain once they got off the mountain. The shortest route there involved traveling northwest along the cliff.

Even with the mountainous terrain and snowy weather slowing down the Exelia, they only needed about ten hours to escape. Or so they thought. However…

"The snow…," Air whispered, and looked up, where she saw absolutely nothing. The snowfall had grown more intense, which completely blotted out all color, and the billowing wind was picking up as time went on, as well. While they initially saw a few miles forward, they lost even that visibility.

*A whiteout…* Rain recalled the name of the phenomenon. It was one of the hazards of a march through snow. The blizzard would fill one's vision with sheer white, making it hard to distinguish snow from sky, to say nothing of the terrain or one's bearing. Seeing anything in any direction would be impossible.

Rain remembered hearing about an incident where a unit of four hundred got stranded in a whiteout, and they all froze to death. The only solution was to stand still and let it pass.

"We have to wait until it dies out," Air explained as she made that judgment call. The four of them decided to wait until visibility improved. Staying in the Exelia with the snow falling would endanger their lives, so Air used her Bullet Magic to blow a hole into a nearby cliff face, creating a makeshift shelter from the wind.

It was roughly 130 feet deep, and they used the Exelia to block off the entrance. They also left the flow engine on, which produced heat for them and kept the entrance from freezing shut.

"Clever," Deadrim whispered, sitting deeper into the cave with her partner. "Getting someone who knows their way around a snowy mountain was the right idea. I never would have thought of digging up a cave to take cover. I'd probably have suggested we press forward."

"Just to make this clear, Deadrim…"

"I know," the ebony girl said. "I thought it would be a good time to stop and treat Isuna's injury, too. Neither of us wants to lose our partners, right, Air?"

"……"

As she spoke, Deadrim squatted down in front of the western officer, Isuna, and ripped through the hem of his trousers. She threw away the ragged cloth and pulled out a handkerchief and sewing needle to stitch the wound closed.

She looked defenseless in that moment. Her back was turned, and she concentrated on treating her partner.

*Should we shoot?* Rain wondered. And yet—

"Take off your clothes," a voice ordered him.

"Huh?"

"I need to treat your wound. Come on, hurry up."

"But…"

"You'll die before you get anything done."

Air had read Rain's mind. However, there was no guarantee they'd hit Deadrim, so she chose to focus on stopping Rain's bleeding instead.

Rain listened to her orders and took off his top. A deep, vivid laceration appeared beneath the fabric. Blood was oozing from it.

Air gazed at the wound, then curtly said, "This'll hurt."

"Ugh…!"

*She wasn't lying.*

"I'll try to stop the bleeding with what I've got in my Exelia maintenance tool kit. You might pass out from the pain, but take advantage of the chance to sleep. If you must moan and scream, you may as well do it in your dreams."

After that, Air took a needlelike wrench used for servicing pistols and drove it into his wound, twisting it as she did. The burst of pain did not immediately fade, and sure enough…

*Ah…!*

…Rain spiraled into unconsciousness.

*This wound…*, Air thought, keeping her hands moving even after Rain passed out. *It's far worse than I imagined.*

Rain had fainted twenty minutes earlier. Deadrim had burned the wound shut when they first met to stop the bleeding, but that was by no means

sufficient treatment. He'd suffered a severe, fatal injury, which brought him to the brink of death.

*…I have to at least stem the bleeding.*

Air spread Rain's ribs open with a cloth and spotted his bleeding lungs, so she used the needle torque wrench to press the surrounding tissues together and stop it. Rain's limbs suddenly spasmed. Despite being unconscious, his body reacted to the pain.

Air used one hand to pin him down while working with the other. There wasn't much light in the grotto, which made it hard to inspect Rain's bloody innards. Still, after a few blind repetitions of the process, she managed to slow the flow of blood.

Unfortunately, that was only a stop-gap measure.

*We don't have any time…* Air understood the situation. If things didn't change, Rain's lungs would collapse, and he would die before the day ended.

*We have to get out of this situation…*

Air heavily considered using her ace in the hole.

*I have to erase the person behind this raid…*

She'd been thinking about it ever since their car fell down the cliff. She had the option of using the Devil's Bullet to erase a person and all of their achievements, to Reprogram the world.

*Deadrim…*

Erasing the girl in black could have changed their fortunes. That thought crossed Air's mind, and she found herself glancing in her direction.

*She's…*

Deadrim had focused entirely on her partner's leg with her back turned to Air. Her hands were stained red with his blood. As she desperately struggled to save Isuna, she honestly looked like she had no intention to fight…

*……*

Air hadn't expected her to act like that. It might have been a surprise attack, but she was daring enough to attack a unit of mages head-on. And now here she sat, fighting bravely to save her comrade.

The sight honestly surprised her. The girl in black struck her as a cold person. Her weapon was strange, her appearance was strange, and her way of speaking was so strange that she didn't even seem fully connected to reality. Most young, skilled mages had an elusive air to them, but Deadrim took it to a whole different level. She was even audacious enough to try to steal an Exelia prototype without backup.

Someone like her was the type to abandon their comrades when things got tough. But for some reason, she hadn't. She'd even proposed their alliance of convenience.

*Something feels off, but what…?*

Air thought the girl seemed odd, but she couldn't put her finger on exactly why. However, as she tried to put the pieces together…

“Rain, do you copy?”

…a distorted voice that didn’t belong to any of them echoed through the grotto.

“I’ve received your transceiver’s serial number. Rain, do you copy?”

It came from Rain’s thigh, from the wireless transceiver he’d received for watch duty.

*It’s Kreis…* Air immediately recognized the voice. It was the woman who’d given them this mission. Kreis Falman, the developer of second-generation Exelia technology.

Air reached out for the transceiver, knowing she had to push a button before it would pick up her voice. However—

“I see.”

“Ah…!”

“Hiding something from us?”

The moment Air heard the question, something struck her right hand.

“G-gaaah…!” Air groaned. Her extended hand was violently beaten away. And the moment she jumped back…

“Ah…!”

…she found herself slammed against the grotto wall. Her back hit the rock, hard and painful enough to knock the wind out of her.

“A wireless transceiver, huh?”

“…Deadrim!”

“Guess they can’t hear us right now.”

Deadrim pushed her sword against Air’s throat, pinning her in place. If she so much as trembled, the blade would slice into her throat.

“Wh-what are you…?”

“Aren’t you going to answer that call?” Deadrim asked while holding her hostage.

*Ah…*

Deadrim had never let down her guard. She’d remained cautious and ready to act the whole time. They may have agreed to cooperate, but it was only a verbal agreement with no guarantees. She hadn’t trusted them one bit, so she’d remained wary of the chance one of them would draw a gun.

Even with her back turned to Rain, she kept her consciousness fixed on Air and only gained a few feet of distance. And that was all her Qualia needed to remain active.

*How…?!*

She'd moved through the small grotto faster than Air could draw a gun and pinned her down with a military saber. Its tip was sharp, so even the slightest movement meant Air's death.

"I'm sorry about this, Air." Deadrim spoke coolly despite the tension. "But you understand, don't you? We're stranded in enemy territory with no hope for reinforcements, and we can't even see where we're going in this weather… We're almost guaranteed to die here. You know what the most important thing to consider in this position is, don't you?"

"…Information."

"Yes. And that includes information on enemy movement. Answer that call. I'll be listening in. Of course, if you expose that we're here or say anything suspicious, I'll do what I have to."

She pressed the blade harder against Air's neck after she finished speaking.

……

Air didn't have a choice.

"Kreis."

"That voice…"

"Yeah, it's me," Air answered Kreis's transmission, hiding the fact that she had a blade against her throat.

"Air!"

"Rain's asleep, so I'm taking the call for him. What happened? Why are you contacting us personally?"

"Can you afford to ask me 'what happened'?!"

Deadrim stood right next to her, but Air needed information all the same.

"Well, I can tell you that with the exception of the one unit that fell down the cliff, we have all the other prototypes."

The information Kreis provided could dictate their future actions. All of the cargo had been delivered safely except for the Turret-Model Exelia they had with them, leaving that as the only unit they needed to recover.

"There is one problem, though."

"…The weather, right?"

"Yes. I'm sure you know how bad it is out there better than us."

"I sure do. Can't see anything but white snow," Air replied, the blade still fixed on her throat. And yet…her tone didn't betray any tension or fear. "Still, we're not too worried. We don't expect anyone to come to our rescue, so we'll try to escape on our own."

"All right. But…" Kreis trailed off, and a few moments of silence followed. "Air, I need to confirm a few things with you."

*Confirm what, exactly?*

"What do you need to know?"

"Did the enemy soldiers who attacked the train fall down the cliff with you?"

Air looked up at Deadrim, who listened in from beside her. She shook her head, telling her how to answer.

"I don't know. I haven't seen their bodies, at the very least."

"I see…"

"Rain and I are on our own at this point."

"Are either of you hurt?"

"…Rain's injured. It's a pretty deep wound, too. You should send medical equipment with the search party."

"I see. So Rain's injured… All right. I'll tell them to be prepared."

Kreis's response seemed positive, but something felt off.

"Listen, Air, I shouldn't have to tell you what to do in case things go south. If you can't escape the mountain and have to pick between your survival and Rain's, I want you to kill him."

"Kh—"

"I really do mean it as a last resort. Obviously, we want you both back alive. However, if that isn't possible, I want you to survive at the very least. If you hesitate, you'll end up making the wrong choice."

"You think I would make mistakes? That's rather presump—"

"Air." Kreis cut her off. "Rain has a strong will. If his sacrifice would swing the war in our favor, he'd do it. Sometimes, the way to honor a person is to let their life be meaningful—even if that means taking it. You have to erase who you must, no matter who it is."

A single thought crossed Air's mind at those words.

*I could erase…Rain?*

Air's definition of *erasing* someone was more literal than most people's.

*If I use the Devil's Bullet…*

What would happen if she shot Rain with one? The logic behind it seemed simple enough. This entire situation likely wouldn't have happened if not for Rain. Perhaps they would have defended the second-generation Exelias properly.

Of course, Kreis didn't know about the Devil's Bullet, so she couldn't have meant it that way. She wanted Air to kill Rain in the normal, ordinary sense. However, her words sounded different in Air's ears. The act of *erasing* someone had a double meaning. Erasing their life…and their existence altogether. Doing that to Rain *might* have led to a better future.

"Well, in the end, the choice of how to handle Rain falls to you… The only thing I can do is give you advice and try to guide you toward the best option. No matter what you decide, I'll accept it."

The choice was Air's to make. Would she let Rain live or prioritize the mission and erase him? Kreis had provided her opinion, but only Air had the right to decide.

"That's all the information I have for you right now. If anything new pops up, I'll contact you again."

"……"

“I’m counting on you, Air. No matter what you choose.”

Kreis shut off the transmission at last, and silence settled over the grotto.

The next moment, Deadrim nodded, and the tension drained from the air.

“Ngh…”

“This situation is bad for you, too, right?” Deadrim asked. Then she let out the breath she’d been holding and pulled the sword away from Air. Her deadly intensity abated, and she returned to her position and squatted down near Isuna.

“You…”

“Don’t look at me like that,” Deadrim said curtly. “You do understand why I don’t like you contacting your people in secret, right?”

“Sure, but that doesn’t change the fact that you broke your promise to cooperate.”

It was a problem of trust. True, they were from rival countries, and their cooperation was only temporary. They both knew they would eventually become enemies again. However, that didn’t mean one of them could break their promise so easily while they still traveled together. Deadrim had antagonized Air when they needed that bare minimum of trust to cooperate.

*Deadrim…*

She clearly understood what losing the other party’s trust in that situation meant. And yet, she’d prioritized getting more information out of Air. She knew how dangerous it was for only one side to receive information, so she’d immediately judged that breaking their trust was the lesser of two evils.

She hadn’t made a reckless decision. Quite the contrary, in fact. She chose the perfect moment to discard trust in order to ensure her survival. Frankly, her depth of experience and resourcefulness didn’t fit a young recruit.

*…Just who is she?*

Deadrim’s behavior was honestly bizarre. As she considered the choices of the girl in black thus far, Air felt a shiver run down her spine.

“Don’t worry,” Deadrim said, meeting Air’s suspicious gaze with cold eyes. “I won’t ask you to forgive me or act like that didn’t happen and expect you to treat me like before. I broke the rules, so I don’t deserve any forgiveness. In fact, I should be punished for what I did, so I’ll relinquish all our firearms to you.”

Deadrim took off her pistol holster and tossed it over to Air. She then did the same with Isuna’s two rifles. The weapons rolled down the grotto’s floor. She had just handed over their weapons—possibly the worst thing she could have done in that situation.

“We don’t carry any other guns. You can break them, throw them away, or use them yourself. They’re yours to do with as you please.”

“……”

“Let me say this, for what it’s worth. I’m sorry, Air. But we’re desperate.”

Deadrim ended the conversation there, leaving everything else up to Air’s judgment. Under most circumstances, relinquishing all her firearms meant unconditional surrender. And for mages, who employed Bullet Magic as their primary weapon, losing their guns was equivalent to losing limbs.

In any other situation, Air would have shot Deadrim and Isuna dead, but she hesitated.

Taking a life was never justified, no matter what. War provided no exception to the rule; it was still an evil act. But when choosing to spare another’s life meant sacrificing your own, things changed. Air knew perfectly well that second thoughts would only result in her death.

*……*

And yet, she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t shoot them. Not out of sympathy but fear. Yes, the enemy had handed over their firearms, which gave Air the advantage in battle. But put another way…

*I can’t risk it…!*

…Deadrim had essentially said she didn’t mind losing her firearms.

*She has a way to fight without them…*

Deadrim had a rather simple personality. At first glance, everything she did seemed rash, but she always thought her actions through. Would someone truly rash have handed over her weapons? Would she have sincerely apologized for what she did?

*Anyone burdened by those emotions wouldn’t be on this battlefield. I see… It’s that saber of hers…*

She clearly had absolute, unflinching confidence in her blade. She knew it was more than enough to dispatch her enemies.

“…I’ll let it go, just this once.”

“Thank you.”

“But I’m warning you, there won’t be a next time.”

That brief exchange was all they said on the matter. A moment later, Air grabbed the firearms Deadrim had handed over and threw them out of the grotto.

One hour later…

*The snow isn’t letting up.*

Air looked outside. The snowfall was still intense enough to white everything out, so the four of them stayed put.

*We’re not going to freeze, but this is still bad.*

Normally, they would have frozen at such cold temperatures, but the Exelia’s engine kept the small grotto warm. In fact, they even felt sweaty given how cramped it was.

They had enough rations to keep themselves fed for five days, and being able to melt ice and snow meant they had no lack of clean water to drink, either. And so, only one thing truly concerned Air.

“Rain.”

“…Huh?”

“I melted some snow. You thirsty?”

“…A bit.”

Air poured some water into her mess kit’s lid and handed it over to Rain, who rested on the grotto’s floor. After taking three sips, Rain returned the lid and slumped back down. Then he stiffened up and gasped heavily.

*Rain…*

His injury had visibly worsened compared to a few hours prior. He’d remained conscious, but his ability to move and act on his own had rapidly deteriorated. And the cause seemed rather obvious. Air had temporarily stopped the bleeding, but that wasn’t a real solution. Rain’s life dimmed with every passing moment. Thus, with that thought in mind, Air sneaked a glance at Rain’s face to check in on him.

*What do I do now…?*

Apparently, he’d fallen asleep. His forehead was dripping with sweat, probably due to the intense pain, and his breaths were ragged.

*……*

Rain appeared unconscious and helpless, so shooting him would be child’s play. All she had to do was open her gun’s chamber, put in a bullet, aim at his head, and pull the trigger. That was all it would take.

Air’s hand clasped her chest, where the transceiver and several silver bullets rested.

*If I just…use this…*

If she used the Devil’s Bullet on Rain, she would escape danger. Air gripped her devilish power, the silver bullet, over her clothes. But at that exact moment…

“Yikes, that doesn’t look good.”

“Ah…!”

…Deadrim spoke, prompting Air to jolt up in surprise.

“Oh, you saw it, too, Air?”

“Wh-what, saw what?!”

“…Why are you panicking?” Deadrim asked as Air acted more awkward than she’d anticipated. “I mean outside. There’s a light outside.”

She pointed at the grotto’s entrance.

*Outside…?*

Air quickly realized what Deadrim meant once she calmed down. An Exelia blocked the grotto’s entrance, which prevented them from seeing what happened outside. However, there was a small gap that they could focus on.

Initially, Air saw nothing but white, a field of endless snow. But after a few seconds of observation, she spotted something else. Lights flickered every now and then amid the blank snowscape from several hundred feet away. They couldn’t have come from a natural source, meaning they had to be man-made.

Air swiftly counted them and realized there were roughly twenty. They weren't heading toward the grotto, but considering the situation, only one thing made sense.

"An army unit of some kind…," Deadrim concluded.

"What kind…? Who sent them?" Air asked.

"There's no way to know," Deadrim replied. "Could be western forces looking for me or some of your people. But based on their numbers, they're armed forces. A platoon."

That made sense. They were likely soldiers sent to find the second-generation Exelia. However, their sudden appearance troubled Air.

*They got here too fast…*

Soldiers from the East or the West couldn't have reached them so quickly. Kreis had informed her that it would take the East over a day, which was why Air had decided to escape the mountain. And that applied to Deadrim, as well.

"A pity, though," Deadrim said. "The Harborant military couldn't have made it here already."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Any chance of it being reinforcements from your side?"

"Doubt it," Air answered honestly.

Air's intuition told her there was no point providing false information.

*Deadrim isn't the real threat right now…*

"So it isn't O'ltmenia, either."

In other words, they had no idea who sent this strike force.

"Well, the only way to find out is to go and check for ourselves. They were probably sent to look for us, so there's a good chance they'll find this place if we don't."

With that said, Deadrim rose to her feet and nudged her head in Air's direction, urging her to join. The two would go out and check, knowing full well that if the force outside belonged to either of their allies, they would become enemies.

Neither of them said it aloud, but their motivation was the same. If that time came, they needed to make sure no harm befell their wounded partners.

# 4. CRIMSON EYES

“Ugh…,” Rain groaned as he opened his eyes. The prickling pain had kept his slumber light. It honestly felt like he hadn’t gotten any rest at all.

“Air…?”

He immediately noticed something was wrong. He was still in the grotto, but Air was nowhere to be found.

*Where’d she go?*

Rain sat up while holding his aching wound. Then he looked around for the silver-haired girl. Unfortunately, he found nothing.

“You’re finally up,” a clear voice spoke to him.

“Ah…”

“Don’t be alarmed. I won’t hurt you. And honestly, I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

The voice lacked any intensity, but its tone left a lingering impression in Rain’s mind. It came from the western soldier with reddish-brown hair, Deadrim’s partner.

“Sad to say, but driving an Exelia’s my specialty. I’ve got no real talent as a mage, and I’m only on the battlefield thanks to Deadrim’s skills. Plus, I don’t even have a gun anymore,” he said with a chuckle.

*I think his name was…*

“You’re Isuna, right?”

“That’s right. Isuna Cole.”

He was the man who’d attacked the train alongside Deadrim. Isuna had damaged his leg when the car tumbled down the cliff, and while he’d gotten some form of first aid, he was still severely injured. He surely felt a great deal of pain, but his expression didn’t so much as twitch.

“My rank is second lieutenant. I never attended an officer’s academy, though. I simply worked my way up over the last ten years.”

“Ten years…”

Like Rain thought, he was a generation older. Given his maturity and leadership of the raid, though, he seemed even older than that.

However, even though he was a mage, Isuna had gotten promoted through regular channels.

*Why is he…?*

“Oh, I’m only here because Deadrim strung me along,” Isuna said after sensing Rain’s suspicious gaze. “I’m all right with an Exelia, but that about sums up my skills. I’ve got no other special abilities.”

*The way he talks about her…*

His tone was friendly and warm when he talked about Deadrim. He didn't seem the slightest bit concerned, either.

"…You can tell me more later," Rain said. "Sorry to change the subject, but the silver-haired girl who was with me and your partner are gone. Do you know where they went?"

"Yes, I do. The two of them went outside around five minutes ago."

"They?"

They'd left the safety of the grotto and gone into the snow.

"You know, to the mountains. They saw some lights and decided to investigate. We're cooperating for the time being, so they left me here to keep an eye on you."

Isuna proposed they wait for the girls to return. However, sitting still and doing nothing made Rain feel like deadweight, which he hated.

"Sorry, but no," Rain said as he wobbled up to his feet. The wound made all his actions sluggish. "I'm going after them. If they saw a light, that means there are soldiers around here."

"Are you sure? I personally don't recommend it, but I won't stop you, either. Except…" Isuna paused at that point and lowered his voice to a whisper. "…If you chase after them, I think you may wish you hadn't after you see what's out there."

The snowfall started to ease up a little.

*Which way did they go…?*

Rain walked through the terrain dotted with conifer trees. His vision was limited, but he could just barely hear the sound of gunfire in the distance.

Isuna had told him Air and Deadrim saw strange lights outside and went to investigate, which meant they didn't know who they were up against. They had no clue if they were reinforcements from either of their respective armies, so they hadn't started fighting right then and there. However, everything would change once they got an answer to that question…

Neither Air nor Deadrim were the kind of person to give up without a fight, but they also only operated on sound logic. Upon realizing they were outnumbered, they would have avoided choices that spelled certain doom. The second-generation Exelia was still a prototype that needed years to properly develop. It wasn't worth staking one's life over when the war was approaching its endgame.

But if that was true, why had Rain heard gunfire? Who was fighting whom?

*"I think you'll wish you hadn't after you see what's out there."*

Isuna's warning echoed in Rain's mind once more.

*What did he mean by that?*

Rain walked through the forest by using the intermittent gunshots as his guide. And after a few minutes of searching, he ran into someone. No…not someone.

He found himself face-to-face with the limbless corpse of a man.

*This is…*

It rested atop the snow. Blood flowed out of the cross sections of its wounds, showing that the person had died mere minutes ago. And the bloodstained snow melted.

Worse yet, the person clearly hadn't been killed on that spot. His limbs were scattered all around, away from his torso. In other words—

*Someone moved him?*

The bloodstains on the snow formed a path that led to his right arm. His left arm was a few feet ahead of that…and both legs were nearby as well. That meant the man had moved as his limbs were hacked off one by one. He'd tried to run as he was slowly but surely dismembered…

*……*

And upon realizing that, Rain felt something cold slither down his spine. The state of the corpse made it clear that the perpetrator was *extremely* brutal.

Rain was a soldier, so he'd grown accustomed to situations where he had to gun people down. However, in those cases, he always aimed at their head or chest. Hitting vitals was more efficient, and it kept the target from suffering any more than necessary. Unfortunately, the killer who had done this clearly didn't share his views.

*They were toying with him…*

Whoever did this had treated their victim like a plaything. They hadn't aimed for the head or somewhere central. Instead, they'd cut off his limbs one by one to ensure they wouldn't die immediately.

If the killer could sever an arm or a leg so cleanly, they could have just as easily beheaded him. But they took their time, intentionally missed their victim's vitals, and chased him around. They only granted him the relief of death after tearing him apart and filling him with despair. Bloodstains surrounded the corpse, which proved that he'd thrashed and struggled up to his last moments.

*Why do this?!*

Rain swallowed the nausea that clawed at his throat and advanced deeper into the woods. The snow had gradually obscured the many sets of footprints.

Whose corpse had he just found? Rain didn't know. He wore a nonspecific uniform, so there was no way to tell his true affiliation. Still, they clearly weren't alone. Farther ahead, there were over twenty others who wore the exact same clothes.

*Another one…*

Rain found a second corpse. It still had its legs, but both of its arms and eyes were missing. After that, he found a third. Its head was split through the middle, and it had been stabbed dozens of times. And when Rain advanced six hundred feet ahead, he found thirty corpses covered in varying stab wounds and lacerations.

*These corpses…*

There were thirty of them. How much blood had that many corpses left in the snow? None of them had been granted an instant death. He could tell someone had tortured them before they died. Those disrespectful acts resembled an innocent child ripping the wings off an insect.

And then…

“Rain, I think it was…?”

…Rain reached his destination at last.

“Should you be moving in your condition?”

He recognized the very same serene voice he’d heard in the grotto earlier. In other words, nothing that had happened had fazed her at all. The girl in black simply spoke to him as if she’d met him on the street.

However, her entire body was dyed red. Her sword gleamed crimson, and her fresh, alluring skin was drenched in blood.

“We should run, Rain. There are more enemies out there,” Deadrim, the girl who’d just murdered thirty people, warned him. “They managed to contact their allies through a wireless transceiver, so there are probably reinforcements inbound. Ha-ha…” She laughed as she wiped the blood off her face. She looked at it as if it were some prize she’d won in a fight, not the blood of over thirty dead people.

Blood covered her from head to toe, but she didn’t seem to care. Instead, she stared off into the distance with hollow eyes. And unlike earlier, they were black and red…wasp-hued.

“A Ghost…,” Rain muttered without thinking.

“…Ghost?” Deadrim asked as she cocked her head quizzically. It honestly sounded like she’d never even heard the word before.

*Doesn’t she know?*

Rain had already encountered several Ghosts, but they were all aware of their mysterious existence. Deadrim seemed different, though, despite her eyes giving her away.

The girl of ebony, Deadrim. Her pupils sparkled like rubies, while the whites of her eyes became the color of pitch. Wasp-hued eyes were unique to Ghosts, indicating they’d just used magic. And Deadrim turned hers toward him as she spoke.

“Do you mean me, Rain? Did you just call me a Ghost?”

“…Yeah.”

“So a Ghost…means a person who’s died before, yes?” Deadrim nodded to herself as she said that, confirming her own suspicions. Then she touched her eyes and returned them to their natural color.

“I’ve spent the last few months living while not really knowing what I am, but I see now. I *did* die back then… Strange. How have I returned to life?”

Rain had met a Ghost. The Ghost Deadrim.

*She’s…*

Rain wanted to walk up to her, but the transceiver in his chest pocket crackled to life, informing him of an incoming transmission. And so, Rain pressed the switch.

"Wait, Rain." Air's voice flowed through the device. "Where are you?"

"In front of Deadrim."

"Then repeat what I'm about to tell you. There are more enemies around. We're surrounded. We need an Exelia's mobility to shake them, so get back to the grotto, stat."

The enemy… Rain still didn't know their identity, but he chose to return to the grotto with Deadrim. By the time they got back, Air and Isuna were already sitting inside the second-generation Exelia. And as soon as Rain and Deadrim got in, the unit moved.

"We have to get out of here."

The Exelia rumbled as it began moving. Its four sturdy legs supported the frame as they stabbed into the snow. They weren't taking the path they'd originally planned to use. Instead of escaping the mountain through the quickest route, they chose to cut through the forest. Air forced them down a path that helped them avoid detection.

However, within a minute, massive shock waves crashed into them from behind.

"Ngh, aaah!"

When he looked around, Rain saw that a large crater had formed with them at the center. Also, three Exelias trailed close behind them.

*Ugh… Why are they attacking us? No, wait, who are they?*

"These people aren't from the East or the West," Air answered Rain's unspoken questions.

As she operated the Exelia, she told him what had happened while he was out cold. Ten minutes earlier, she and Deadrim had left the grotto to investigate the source of the flickering lights. And they'd found a platoon of thirty soldiers.

Upon realizing they were outnumbered, they'd tried to escape. Unfortunately, enemy scouts had spotted them, so a battle broke out. Deadrim slaughtered the lot of them, but not before they'd managed to send a transmission about the girls' presence.

That explained the Exelias hot on their tails.

"I inspected the soldiers Deadrim killed but didn't find anything," Air said. She had prioritized gathering intel, so she'd studied the dead bodies while Deadrim went on a killing spree. "They didn't have equipment or ID affiliated with any particular faction. There's no way an entire platoon of thirty soldiers is simply missing ID, so it has to be systemic. Plus, their reinforcements arrived far too fast."

"This whole situation smells fishy," Deadrim said. "How is it possible that some army not related to the East or West arrived here first? I mean, this is a high-level assault force organized for combat. Something like that doesn't just pop out of thin air."

They'd fallen off the train by accident. The probability of them happening upon some enemy unit who'd infiltrated the East's territory wasn't zero, but it wasn't likely, either. Also, none of the thirty soldiers had carried anything that identified them as members of a particular army. It had all worked out too perfectly, as if they'd anticipated coming into contact with hostile forces.

Based on Deadrim's tone, there was no chance of them being from Harborant. And yet, these unaffiliated newcomers had appeared with perfect gear for the situation.

*……*

Rain pored over the course of events one more time. Something… Something felt terribly off. The second-generation Exelia. Deadrim, who'd raided the train with said Exelia on it. And now, an unknown army that didn't belong to either of their countries.

What if the entire scenario wasn't just a random flurry of events? What if someone had planned the whole thing from the beginning?

*……*

Rain shivered. It felt as though he'd just caught a glimpse of something massive but indiscernible to the naked eye.

*No, not now…*

He shook his head and tried to banish the terror welling up in him. He had to focus on handling the enemy before their eyes.

Rain turned around, lifted the rifle he had, and fired Bullet Magic at the units chasing them. The recoil sent a jolt of pain through his wound, but he couldn't allow them to look like a passive, helpless target when their objective was to escape.

The three enemy Exelias remained close behind them. Air was a far better driver and would have easily shaken them off if there had been only one enemy unit. Unfortunately, she had to avoid three enemies at once, so she lost speed every time she had to dodge an attack. They slowly closed the distance between them, as if gradually tightening a noose around their neck.

*Dammit… What can we do?*

Numbers granted an overwhelming advantage in Exelia combat. Even Air's transcendent skills weren't enough to compensate for a numerical disadvantage. Rain looked around, trying to think of a way to break out of the deadlock, but the snowy trees didn't offer any solutions.

Eventually, they exited the woods and reached a clear field that offered good visibility. They'd found a large snowscape without a single tree in sight.

*This is…*

It took Rain a moment to realize where they were.

"A frozen lake," Air whispered from in front of him. "The water's frozen over, and it's solid enough that we can drive on the surface."

“So right now, we’re…” Rain trailed off upon realizing that they stood on solid ice. “Why don’t we use Bullet Magic to break the ice?”

“Hmm?”

“If we make a hole under the enemies, they’ll sink into the water. All three of them are behind us, so we just have to smash open an area we’ve already crossed.”

It was a simple enough trap. And his idea made perfect sense, since Exelias were effectively heavy scrap metal when dropped underwater.

“It won’t work,” Air said as she shook her head after analyzing the situation properly. “From what I can see, this ice is at least six feet thick. Your Bullet Magic’s shock waves won’t burst through it. We can’t launch a surprise attack and break through the ice with one shot. But sure, go ahead. Try it. It’s not like we’ve got any better ideas.”

Rain held up his rifle and fired powerful Bullet Magic. But just like Air said, the section he hit didn’t break, nor did the shock waves transmit to the rest of the ice. The solid surface remained whole, so the three units kept pursuing them. Rain thought they were maintaining the status quo, but—

“Keep going and get us off the lake,” the ebony girl who’d remained silent thus far said.

“Keep going? The moment we get off the lake, they’ll catch us.”

“Just do it,” Deadrim insisted. “Listen, Air, keep them off us for another minute… No, even less. I’ll handle the rest…with my Bullet Magic.”

*Deadrim’s Bullet Magic…?*

Rain recalled that Deadrim was a Ghost, a supernatural existence equipped with a unique divinity that granted Bullet Magic beyond the realm of normal mages. The Devil’s Bullet Air and Rain possessed used the divinity of the Belial race. And since Deadrim was a Ghost, she must have had a power that equaled it in standing.

“…I can’t say I trust you all that much, but we’ll have to get off the lake at some point.”

“Right. That’s fine.”

“What are you planning? Maybe we can help.”

“Lend me a pistol, then. Even a small one will do.”

“……” Air silently threw a pistol in her direction.

“Anything else?”

“Anything…? Heh, well, you don’t have to brace yourself,” Deadrim said with a smirk. “I’ll be done in a jiffy.”

Their Exelia got off the frozen lake, and a few seconds later, the ones following them reached land as well. With that, the option of cracking the ice under them disappeared.

The enemy units picked up speed, darting toward them. Deadrim lifted her pistol to meet their challenge. It was the first time they’d seen her use a gun instead of a sword.

*What is she doing…?*

Rain watched her like a hawk, trying to piece together the nature of the ability she was about to use. He wanted to know more about her unique Bullet Magic. He'd seen her launch all sorts of baffling attacks thus far, but he still couldn't fathom how she'd done it. Her abilities defied all common sense and logic.

How had she attacked the train? How had she stabbed Rain? How had she killed those thirty soldiers? Rain couldn't answer any of those questions. And that was why…

*Deadrim…!*

…he strained his eyes, trying to discern her actions. Thanks to that, he saw it. Deadrim pulled out a single bullet. A *blue* bullet.

*…Blue?*

She loaded that bullet with an unusual, unfamiliar color into the gun. And then…

"Activate."

…she fired it.

The blue bullet, which looked entirely unlike anything Rain had ever seen, flew through the air. Deadrim turned around and fired toward the enemy, but her shot didn't connect with any of their Exelias. It zoomed between them, cutting through empty air before lodging itself into the frozen lake they'd passed mere moments ago.

The bullet only made the slightest sound as it crashed into the ice. No deafening explosion resounded. It simply gouged into the ice.

*She missed?*

However, just as that thought crossed Rain's mind…

…something suddenly crushed the three enemy units, and they exploded under to the immense pressure.

*What the hell is that?!*

An intense rumbling shook Rain's eardrums. His whole body trembled as a shock wave rolled out, powerful enough to blind him to everything around him. It filled him with the terror of death, though it only lasted for a moment.

Rain feared that the enemy might have fired some Bullet Magic at them. But that wasn't it. Something different had just happened. Rain felt the *aftershocks* of what took place.

*This is…*

Ice. A massive block of ice, six feet thick, was all he could see.

It covered the trail they had taken, completely desecrating the pristine wooded landscape.

The gargantuan mass sat there with the three enemy Exelias beneath it, crushed beyond all recognition. Even an Exelia's sturdy frame was cardboard beneath tens of thousands of tons.

*What just happened?!*

Rain didn't immediately understand. However, upon looking around, he realized something that made every hair on his body stand on end.

The ice over the lake had *disappeared*.

*Ah…!*

Two and a half acres of the frozen water's surface had vanished, leaving only surging water in its wake. The block of ice that formed the surface, a mass of staggering weight, had moved somewhere else in the blink of an eye.

"The bullet I possess is the blue bullet," Deadrim said as she inspected the destruction she'd caused. Her eyes had taken on the familiar wasp-hued color of a Ghost. "It shifts the position of anything it shoots."

## 5. GHOST “DEADRIM”

They spent the next hour moving forward. Eventually, the sun started to set. Driving an Exelia through snowfall and darkness would be suicide, especially since it made their headlights easy to detect from afar. They had no choice but to find cover.

They had literally crushed the enemy forces… Or rather, Deadrim had. But those three units were part of a much larger group. Their remaining units were likely in hot pursuit.

*We can’t keep fighting like this…*

The constant battles had exhausted everyone present, Air and Deadrim included.

“We need to find somewhere we can rest,” Air suggested.

As they headed north, Rain and his group found themselves in a small clearing that was most likely a lumbering site used during the summer season. Small huts that served as lumber storehouses surrounded the area.

The campsite was by no means large, but they could at least start a fire to keep warm and avoid freezing. The four of them decided to spend the night in one of the shacks. The fact that they got to spend the night without wasting any more of their stamina or Exelia fuel was a blessing.

Upon entering the shack, they started a fire and took some time to rest. They planned to set out again at sunrise, which gave them roughly twelve hours in that position. Though, put another way, any preparation they made during those twelve hours meant the difference between life and death.

Essentially, they needed information.

“Deadrim.”

“What?”

“About that bullet you shot earlier…,” Air asked, trying to get a handle on the situation.

“Apparently, I’m a *Ghost*,” Deadrim replied almost indifferently as she took a sip of hot water. “Or, well, that’s what your friend over there called me.”

She then cracked a self-deprecating smile and added, “But you’re in the same boat, aren’t you? When you cast a spell earlier, I saw your eyes turn black and red, just like mine. Those eyes…are exclusive to Ghosts, right?”

Deadrim raised her head, and her eyes took on that unnatural, wasp-hued color.

“I certainly remember dying once,” she said as she touched her eyes. “It was a fairly small battlefield, and I got a little distracted, but that was all it

took. An enemy sniped me from a distance, first through the chest, then through the neck. Looking back, I probably died instantly, but my consciousness lingered for a surprisingly long time."

Deadrim chuckled, but no one joined her laughter. Both pairs sat across from each other. Rain and Air from the East, Deadrim and Isuna from the West. However, each pair contained someone who shouldn't exist.

"The next time I came to, I found myself in some unfamiliar town," Deadrim continued. "I tried to live peacefully. I didn't have anything, didn't own anything. But in the end, I got drawn back to the battlefield. Looks like it was the same for you, Air."

"……"

"So you listen to me but won't respond… Hmm, in that case…" The girl paused. "…How about we discuss this alone, Air?"

"Huh?"

"You feel a little less tired now, right?" the girl in black asked as she rose to her feet. "There are some things I want to ask you, since you're a fellow Ghost with a life similar to mine."

After that, Deadrim walked out of the shack. She left before anyone stopped her, and Air seemed hesitant to follow.

"You should probably go after her," Rain said, noticing her conflicted gaze.

"But…"

"I'll be fine. We need to gather information on the enemy, right?"

"…I'll be right outside, okay? If anything happens, call for me," Air said as she shouldered her weapons and followed Deadrim.

However, as she left…

*I have to make sure I'm ready.*

…Air loaded a bullet into her open chamber. A *silver* bullet unlike any other.

*If I find any opening, I'll shoot her.*

She planned to shoot the ebony Ghost with that bullet. The Devil's Bullet contained the power of Oblivion. It erased every trace of its victim from history. And so, if she shot Deadrim with it, their situation would instantaneously improve. The raid on the train would cease to exist.

Air hadn't forgotten her initial goal for even a moment. Deadrim simply hadn't shown any sign of weakness. But if the situation changed, she might slip up. With that thought in mind, she followed her outside.

"It's cold, huh?" the other Ghost commented, the first to speak.

"Obviously. We're outside," Air replied curtly, facing her.

They stood against the hut's wall, so the wind didn't blow against them. However, the air was still in freezing temperatures.

"Well, let's take a seat," she said, prompting Air to join her on a pile of lumber.

"……"

Air sat a short distance from her in a show of caution. She could still see Deadrim's face clearly thanks to the moonlight shining down on them from between the clouds, reflecting off the white snow.

"But still," Deadrim said as she regarded Air's position, "we might be Ghosts, but our bodies act the same. It's cold."

"Yeah."

"I always got cold easily in life, and it looks like death hasn't changed that."

"Can't say I care."

"I wonder what's going on with our bodies."

"What do you mean, 'what's going on' with them…?"

"Well, I can't imagine they just left my body where it was."

Deadrim had only become a Ghost during the current war. Battles between their two countries had continued over the last century, and each time a new great war broke out, the dead manifested in fresh bodies—as Ghosts. Air had died one hundred years ago and manifested four times since. As such, she knew a fair bit about Ghosts. And that was exactly why she hesitated.

What was a Ghost's body made of? The answer to that question wouldn't grant Deadrim any peace of mind.

"We use bodies that originally belonged to someone else."

"Uh, what?"

"Ghosts steal bodies to manifest. Someone dies, then you possess their corpse."

"…Well, that's a little disturbing," Deadrim said, her expression slightly puzzled. Still, she didn't become needlessly depressed. "Who can use such powerful magic?"

"I don't know. I can't even be sure that one person in particular is responsible. However, I've been active for the last hundred years, so whoever's doing this has been at it for at least that long. If it's one person, they must be really old."

"I bet…" Deadrim did not answer the joke in kind.

"……"

"Are there other Ghosts aside from us?" Deadrim continued questioning Air, hoping to ascertain her true nature. She listened to her replies and latched on to any topic that caught her interest. And Air, who sat there as the girl pelted her with questions, found herself happy to oblige.

*I guess telling her a little more won't hurt…*

No one had ever explained things to Air when she first became a Ghost, so she understood how Deadrim felt. Questions kept piling up, like who and what she was, like how she was alive when she remembered dying.

At the time, Air had to dig for pieces if information and put them together herself, fighting against that anxiety all the while. And after battling the other Ghosts over the last one hundred years, she grew to understand what she was.

So if Deadrim wanted to know, Air wanted to answer her questions.

"There are other Ghosts out there. Though, I've only met a few of them."

"Do Ghosts have any distinguishing features?"

"The biggest one is how our eyes turn wasp-hued when we use magic. It's not just us. That happens to the other Ghosts, too. I've never met an exception. Oh, and every Ghost has a special bullet that's laced with unique magic. Mine is this silver bullet."

Air presented hers. She assumed showing its appearance wouldn't matter much if she didn't reveal its power.

"I see. So this one's my special bullet," Deadrim said as she reached into her shirt and pulled out a necklace. It wasn't a regular necklace but a bullet.

It was a rather deep shade, like teal dipped in black paint. It also had a distinct, dark-gray sheen that couldn't be easily replicated. There could be no mistaking it. That bullet proved Deadrim was a Ghost.

It granted her the ability to change things' positions, which felt absurdly powerful. Air had only seen it move the ice from the lake, but she knew it had the power to render any tactic or formation meaningless. It completely bypassed standard strategy.

Plus, depending on how it was used, it had a wide variety of applications. Air assumed she could activate it by simply touching it to something. In other words, she didn't actually need to shoot it.

Deadrim could manipulate anything in contact with the bullet at will. And that applied to the bullet she carried on her, as well. Since it dangled from her neck, it remained in constant contact with her, granting her the ability to teleport.

That explained how she'd stabbed Rain from behind.

*And she could have just as easily targeted me… Ghosts truly are obscenely powerful.*

"I see," Deadrim said while gazing at her blue bullet. "I never had this power in life, so it's been weighing on my mind. I'm glad I understand now. What a relief."

"…You really don't know anything, do you?"

It had taken Air quite some time to gather information about Ghosts, but she'd never slacked off like Deadrim. Air had earnestly pursued information, while Deadrim had not even really cared.

"I always assumed all Ghosts were serious and tenacious, but I suppose I was wrong."

"Well, I had Isuna by my side, so I didn't have to bear everything on my own. Plus, there's this man named Kaisei who always finds the perfect battlefields for me."

"Kaisei?"

"He's a lieutenant in Harborant's ground forces. He has a very high opinion of my abilities, so he said that he'd grant me all the chances I could

ever want to fight. Thanks to that, I've managed to make do without hunting down information on my own."

"Hmm…"

"But Kaisei hasn't told me about anything other than the war. He prepares battlefields and sends me out to fight, but that's it. Isuna and I have been fighting for him since."

Apparently, Deadrim had woken up in a supportive environment. She had a person who knew her before she'd died in Isuna, and this Kaisei person had handled all the subtleties of being an active-duty soldier. Thanks to that, Deadrim simply had to focus on surviving the battles.

"You got lucky. Though I can't say I'm exactly jealous."

"It was different for you?"

"Not just for me. All Ghosts live according to a separate flow of time. We have to think for ourselves and fight alone to survive. That's why we have the pact."

"The pact?" Deadrim parroted blankly. It seemed she really didn't know.

*…I haven't even revealed this secret to Rain.*

Air pulled out the bullet dangling from her own neck. However, unlike a normal bullet, it had her name, *Air Arland Noah*, etched onto it.

"It's another unique ability we Ghosts possess. After etching our name onto a bullet, we can bind any person we shoot into absolute servitude. Essentially, they lose the right to oppose your orders."

"Oooh…," Deadrim cooed, revealing her surprise. Apparently, that idea had drawn her interest. "That's interesting. Maybe I should pump one of these into Isuna or you."

"Don't try it. Isuna aside, forming a pact with someone means sharing some of your unique magic with them. If you shoot me, I can use your blue bullet."

"…Guess I better not."

The pact was certainly powerful. Many Ghosts relied on it to create slaves on the battlefield. But it wasn't an absolute power, so it carried its own set of risks that made it hard to abuse.

Ghosts instinctively knew how to manifest their unique bullets. Despite having no prior knowledge, Air had summoned the Devil's Bullet and the pact bullet as if it was second nature. But that apparently didn't apply to Deadrim. She was blessed with people who supported her; perhaps she hadn't needed it.

"Understood. I'll refrain from using the pact, then. Thankfully, I seem to be surrounded by men who already do as I say, so I don't need to force anyone to obey me."

"Good for you," Air replied, thinking Isuna and that Kaisei person clearly had their work cut out for them. Then she put the bullet with her name on it back inside her clothes.

"I'd like to ask you about a Ghost's memories next," Deadrim said.

“…If you like,” Air responded curtly. If nothing else, she had resigned herself to the fact that she wouldn’t find an opening in this situation.

Since Air held the answers she sought, Deadrim wanted to know everything she could to clear her long-standing doubts. However, after getting through the most crucial questions, Deadrim hung her head.

“Then I’d like to make a request, as a fellow Ghost.”

*A request?*

“Please help me save Isuna.”

“…What?”

“I hoped to keep an eye on him until the last minute, but we’re running out of time.” Deadrim’s voice remained cold and collected, but the contents of her words seemed entirely different from their discussion thus far.

*Save Isuna?*

“I’ve kept it a secret from the two of you, but Isuna didn’t just hurt his leg. He’s got a deep wound on his back, too. I’ve done everything I can, but the bleeding won’t stop. He probably only has half a day left at most.” Deadrim was asking Air for help. “If you do, I’ll abandon my mission to retrieve the second-generation Exelia prototype.”

And now she was offering to abandon her duty as a soldier to save a single man.

*What is she saying…?*

Air, of course, refused to take her words at face value. She assumed Deadrim planned to double-cross her. A proper soldier never would have done as she suggested; refusing to fight due to fear of death was a military felony. Deserting in the middle of a mission was punishable by firing squad.

“I’ll retire from the military. If you help save Isuna, I’ll cooperate with you on all fronts.”

And yet Deadrim was still making that choice. She decided to cast aside her mission in order to save their skin. She wanted to live instead of fighting to their last breaths.

“What…?”

“Yes?”

“What are you saying…?” As a fellow Ghost, Air couldn’t fathom what Deadrim had just suggested. “Didn’t you two come here on top-secret military orders?”

The decision felt utterly incomprehensible. In Air’s mind, military missions were simply that important. Deadrim’s partner was fatally wounded, yes, but so was Air’s. Rain had suffered a severe chest wound, so he wouldn’t survive the next few hours, let alone half a day. But not once did he suggest running to survive. The thought seemingly hadn’t even crossed his mind.

The idea of dying terrified him, that much was certain, but he’d gathered his resolve to protect the second-generation Exelia down to his last breath.

Despite the awful pain, Rain had refused to let it show on his face. He knew his actions would save the lives of many, so he did not give up. And

because Air understood his feelings, she also never once considered the possibility of fleeing.

He was fatally injured but still wished to carry out his duty. And she helped him, since that was the best way to honor his will.

Unfortunately, that kept Air from saying the one thing she truly wanted to suggest.

*Let's run for it.*

*Ugh… What am I thinking?*

Air shook her head desperately to disperse the thought. Deadrim hadn't hesitated to suggest it, though, and that enraged her.

*She's so…!*

Air fumed. She hated seeing this other girl make light of the idea of pride. And so, she rose to her feet, pulled out the pistol holstered near her chest, and aimed it at Deadrim in an unmistakable gesture of attack.

"Whoa…," Deadrim muttered as she reached for the sword at her waist. Only a few feet separated them. Normally, the gun was faster at that range, but…

*……*

…Air didn't move. The pressure kept her pinned in place. The future she foresaw ended in her death. And in addition to that, Air had caught a glimpse of how Deadrim fought earlier that day.

*Deadrim…*

She'd massacred thirty mages with nothing but a sword in hand. She'd completely ignored the enemy's bullets and the Exelias' mobility as she flitted through the battlefield, cutting down her foes one by one.

The sight of the girl in black gracefully soaring through the air flashed in Air's mind. Those peerless skills were the source of her confidence…the source of her existence as a Ghost.

"…Hmm."

A few seconds passed as they stood frozen.

"Air." Deadrim sensed Air's anger. Air was brimming with—and was bound by, a sense of duty—down to the very last strand of her argent hair.

"…What?"

"Do you remember how you died?"

"……" Air nodded but didn't say anything more.

"I see. Well, so do I. It was a near-instant death, but the last things I heard and saw left a strong impression on me," Deadrim said without letting her hand or sword shake at all. "Isuna was right next to me when I got shot."

"You mean…?"

"Yeah, the middle-aged man in the hut," she confirmed with a hint of playfulness in her voice. "We were the same age back then."

Air understood the implications. And the sorrow of being unable to age alongside her peers.

“It happened ten years ago… And really, it was such a small, minor skirmish,” Deadrim carried on as if reminiscing. “The two countries were in a state of cold war, so actual battles were rare. Harborant sent us to augment the numbers in the Battle of Winkel. I was a mage on the muster roll, while Isuna was a cadet.”

“Were you two…?”

*Were you in love?* Air nearly asked, but she swallowed the words at the very last second.

*……*

It wouldn’t have mattered if she’d asked, but the thought embarrassed her.

“Do you want to know?”

“…Not really.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re more innocent than I thought.”

“I told you I don’t want to know!”

“Oh, hush. There’s no rule against soldiers falling in love.”

“I just said I…” Air trailed off, then briefly paused and said, “I don’t really…care…”

Deadrim smiled at her evasive stammering. The silver-haired girl appeared strong-willed, but even she had topics she couldn’t handle well, it seemed.

“Well, it’s not like we’re in a relationship or anything.”

“…I see.”

“But I *do* love him.”

“……”

Deadrim was so casual about it that Air was stunned.

“No one’s more important to me than Isuna. If he died, I would as well. Without him, I have nothing left to live for… But who knows how he feels about me.”

Air had met several Ghosts over the course of her life, but they’d all been driven by intense hatred. They’d all prioritized satisfying their rage above all else. However, Deadrim was nothing like them. Inside her soul, she carried…

“Isuna is everything to me. And that will never change.”

…pure, unadulterated affection for a single person. Her feelings for Isuna spurred her onward. At a glance, it appeared beautiful, but there was also a dark side to that fastidious love.

*Deadrim is obsessed…*

Air saw it as another form of cruelty. Isuna was irreplaceable, but that also meant Deadrim was willing to sacrifice everyone and everything else for his sake. Her values were so frighteningly steadfast that the lives of others were disposable in her eyes.

“Isuna and I have been friends since we were little. Back then, we dreamed about becoming military mages. Our village was near the border, so battles often extended toward it. That’s why we wanted to become mages

and defend it," Deadrim informed her. "I had more talent as a mage, so I got promoted faster, but Isuna earnestly followed in my footsteps. He said he wanted to fight by my side even if he lacked talent. That day… The day I got shot was the first time we acted as official partners. It was the day our dream came true."

Air could only imagine the lives they'd led from childhood and what they felt for each other. They were clearly more than just acquaintances. If nothing else…Deadrim harbored deep feelings for that officer.

"I died before Isuna's eyes. The last thing I remember is the sight of him weeping and trying to gather up the remains of my crushed, still heart. I don't think I've ever seen someone look so confused, lost, or sad before. And honestly, I doubt I ever will again, either."

"……"

Even after she learned what drove Deadrim, Air didn't trust her.

"Also, I'll tell you something, since we're already in this together."

"What?"

"The thing is, I'm already a traitor. Before we started our raid on the train, Isuna and I killed ten Harborant soldiers."

"……"

"The military sent us after the second-generation Exelias, but Isuna and I had another objective in mind."

Apparently, they had a reason to betray their country and kill their own comrades.

"Listen, we never intended to hand the second-generation Exelia to the West. Instead, we planned to claim it for ourselves." Deadrim showed Air the bullet dangling from her neck. Then she leveled a questioning gaze at her. "Air, do you enjoy war?"

"…What kind of question is that?" Air replied, clearly confused. In her mind, enjoyment didn't figure into the equation. She simply saw it as a phenomenon beyond her control.

"See, I hate war," Deadrim declared.

"……"

"When I was young, I was filled with a sense of duty. I believed my enemies were evil and that killing them would make me feel good. Proud. However, when I finally became a mage and saw a real battlefield for the first time, I realized something… Those kids standing on the other side were no different than me."

That was the harsh reality everyone had to accept. Perceptions of good, evil, and justice were pointless in times of war.

"At this point, war has stolen everything from me. It took my life, Isuna's future…everything."

Deadrim, however, refused to accept that. She rejected the madness.

"Isuna and I will end this war. Nothing more, nothing less," the ebony Ghost said of her oath.

"Ah…!"

And oddly enough, it was the very same wish Air and Rain harbored.

“The magic I’ve gained as a Ghost is exceedingly powerful. I can freely change the position of anything my bullet touches. It makes formations and terrain completely irrelevant. If we couple that power with the second-generation Exelia’s capability for solo operations, we’ll be invincible.”

The ability to ignore troop positioning and topography was powerful enough on its own, so with a second-generation Exelia’s mobility added to that, their advantages would be insurmountable.

Anything would die when its head was crushed, be it an insect, a human, or an entire military. Killing the commander was a surefire method to end any battle. And Deadrim could do that with lethal efficiency by ignoring everything else and teleporting herself straight to them.

“Isuna and I will be able to finish all battles instantly that way, which should end the war for good. That’s why we need the second-generation Exelia… Still, none of that is worth more to me than his life,” Deadrim said, then turned her gaze to the shack. A wounded officer sat on the other side of that wall…the very same man she’d been bound to for ten long years.

“Peace only matters if Isuna is there to experience it with me. I died like a bug on a windshield ten years ago, so I deserve at least that much, right?”

“If you have someone like that…”

“Hmm?”

“If you have someone you feel that strongly about, how can you callously kill people the way you do?”

Air had seen Deadrim sadistically toy with the thirty enemy soldiers. If everything the other ghost said was true, and her love for Isuna and hatred for war drove her, then why had she acted so cruel and merciless? It made no sense. The atrocities she committed were an affront to life itself. Someone who truly desired love and peace would not have done that.

*That makes no sense.*

Or so Air believed, but—

“You misunderstand. I can do that *because* I got killed.”

“…What?”

“In the end, I didn’t feel anything.”

She had died an instant death from a sniper’s shot. She remembered seeing Isuna in her final moments—but not much else.

“I wasn’t even granted a moment to reflect. I felt no pain, had no time to suffer, to grieve, to breathe a last gasp, to fear…to sense death creeping up on me. I simply died for no rhyme or reason. And the next thing I knew, ten years had passed…” Deadrim paused there for a second, then continued. “I wanted to leave behind some kind of proof that I’d lived. I wanted to leave a deep, lasting impression of my emotions. I didn’t care even if it rang hollow, so long as I remained in Isuna’s heart. If I had to die, I wanted to convey my despair, pain, anger, and regret to the world.”

And so, Deadrim etched those emotions into her enemies. If she had to kill them, she carved deep pain and despair into their flesh because even

those negative emotions were something she once desired. In her mind, allowing them to leave some trace upon the world was the greatest honor she could grant a dying person. Her idea of decorum…of propriety. And yet —

"…Have you lost your mind?"

Air understood her reasons, but she couldn't sympathize. What did this achieve, striking fear into someone by torturing them before their death? That act didn't even have a religious meaning to it—it was just pure cruelty. Yet, somehow, in Deadrim's mind, none of that conflicted with her desire for peace.

No matter how she tried to justify her actions, how much she claimed to want to end the war, Air only reached a single conclusion about the girl of black.

She was a Ghost. A dead woman operating beyond the bounds of human logic. A harbinger of calamity. A person warped and skewed…

*But this still doesn't add up…*

Something had to have changed her. Air had gotten used to it already, so it no longer seemed as glaring as it initially had, but she used a sword. That made no sense.

*Why would she do that?*

This world had magic but no miracles. Bringing a sword to a gunfight was foolish, and bullets that let you shift things' positions didn't change that fact. Mages fought by coupling the future sight from their Qualia with the magic from their firearms. And yet, Deadrim fought with a sword.

*Wait, what if I have things backward?*

Perhaps she'd thought about it all wrong? Perhaps Deadrim wasn't so strong she only needed a sword.

Perhaps that was simply *more convenient*.

*Everything makes more sense from that angle.*

It answered her doubts. Ghosts always acted according to pure logic, without exception. They weren't bound by ethics or morals, so they unflinchingly chose the most optimal means of achieving their goal. With that in mind, maybe Deadrim used a sword because it suited her fighting style the most.

The power Deadrim had gained was a bullet with the ability to shift the position of objects, so she didn't use a gun because a sword went best with that magic. However, using a sword to slay an enemy was far more direct and vivid than shooting them with a gun, which meant she had to develop an ideology that lessened her guilt. She had to craft a justification for her horrific, savage acts of murder.

"I care about Isuna's well-being more than anything else in the world," the ebony girl claimed. "When I woke up after ten years, he cried with joy and chose to stay by my side. I'll never forget that. I love him with all my heart, Air."

And that was why she'd begged Air for help.

“I plan to take the shortest route off this mountain tomorrow morning. There’s a good chance I’ll run into the enemy, but if I don’t take that risk, Isuna will die. And that’s where you come in.”

She proposed a foolish plan. Taking a roundabout path seemed smarter, since it greatly reduced the chance of the enemy detecting them. If Air wished to complete their mission and take back the second-generation Exelia, then a detour was ideal. Unfortunately, choosing that option…

“That black-haired boy will die, too, you know?”

…would have signed Rain’s death warrant. He was on the verge of bleeding out, after all.

Air knew she had to prioritize delivering the Exelia. That one unit had the potential to turn the tides of the war, so a single cadet’s life didn’t even compare to it. And yet—

“What will you do?”

“……” Air remained silent. She found herself unable to answer that question.

“What’s most important to you?” Deadrim asked. “Come to think of it, the person you talked to earlier told you to kill Rain, didn’t they?”

“Ah…!”

She clearly meant Kreis. The words from their earlier conversation rang in Air’s mind.

*“If you can’t escape the mountain and have to pick between your survival and Rain’s, I want you to kill him.”*

“But you didn’t kill him, even after all this, which means…”

“…You’re wrong.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not like you!” Air raised her voice in anger when Deadrim questioned her resolve. “I have never, *ever* forgotten my mission! How dare you even suggest Rain and I would do that!”

Her heated words seemed to admonish herself as much as Deadrim.

“Rain and I are partners—partners and nothing else! There’s no place for needless emotions between us!”

Air was confident that up to that point, she’d always picked the most logical, beneficial course of action.

“We made a promise. We swore we would put an end to this conflict… that we’d stop this war once and for all. If it would help make that dream a reality, I’d abandon him without a second thought. And I know he’d do the same! We’ve only made it this far *because* we have that resolve.”

*We will change the world. We will end this age of war.*

They were both willing to sacrifice their lives to achieve that goal, which explained why they made an oath that otherwise sounded like a laughable delusion. Air was furious to hear someone bringing these saccharine emotions into the equation.

“We’re not like you, Deadrim. We would never cast our mission aside to save our lives. If we can’t even take that risk, we’ll never truly change anything.”

Perhaps Deadrim and Air truly wished for the same thing. Their methods differed, but Deadrim *did* hate war. Those words rang true. She wished for peace, and she was willing to sacrifice many and cast away nearly anything to achieve it. In that regard, she was unlike any Ghost Air had ever met. She fundamentally differed from those who only existed in battle and thrived in conflict.

Still, her way of thinking was too different from Air’s. And indeed, she brushed her words aside like a feather.

“That’s not what I asked you. I want to know if you wish to save that boy… That’s all.”

“…I suppose we’ll never see eye to eye.”

“I must agree. You want to create a peaceful world, but how do you intend to live there when all the people you love are dead and buried?”

“……”

“It’s not a matter of choosing one over the other. Reach out and claim both. I want to be with Isuna. I want to hold hands with him, kiss him, and have children with him, if possible. And to do that, I need the war to end. That’s all that matters,” Deadrim said, then sighed. “Well, you’ll have to decide soon enough.”

Then she turned around…

“It’s getting too cold out here for my liking. We can continue this talk later.”

…and walked back into the shack where Isuna and Rain awaited their return.

After the two Ghosts walked outside the shack to talk…

*Ah…!*

…Rain descended into a coughing fit.

“Gah, aaaaaah!”

A mixture of blood and saliva poured from his mouth. He lifted his fingers and saw they were already red. He’d been coughing it up for a while, it seemed.

His stab wound tormented him, while his body was going numb.

*This is bad…*

The shadow of death loomed over Rain. He understood that much. His bleeding hadn’t stopped, and his thoughts grew hazier by the minute.

“Can you still talk?” Isuna asked Rain, noticing how weak he looked.

“I think…”

“Ha-ha-ha, we’re both in dire straits. I’m starting to feel pretty bad myself.”

Both of them had put on brave fronts to keep their partners from needlessly worrying. However, their respective injuries still threatened to extinguish the flickering candles of their lives.

The two of them spoke in hushed tones as they leaned against parallel walls.

“Ghosts…right?”

“What…?”

“That’s what they’re called, yeah?” Isuna said in a raspy whisper. “That girl, Air…and Deadrim, too… They’re Ghosts. It’s strange, really. That word made everything click into place. I wanted to know how a girl who’d died ten years ago found me again…looking just like she always had…”

“Did you know her before she died?” Rain asked.

Isuna nodded and replied, “I didn’t just *know* her… I was with her when she died. She was shot in the neck and chest, and a few seconds later, she… left me behind…”

In the ten years that followed, Isuna wandered the battlefield all alone.

“But a few months ago, Rim, she…showed up out of nowhere. It’d been ten years, but she looked exactly the same as I remembered… She just walked up to me and said ‘Whoa, you’re *really* old now.’ She looked so confused…” Isuna sighed. After all, if anyone should have been shocked, it was him. He studied Rain a bit more closely and asked, “How about you and that girl?”

He seemed to want to know their relationship.

Rain honestly had no reason to answer that question, but he relented before the sincerity in the officer’s tone.

“…I only met Air for the first time *after* she became a Ghost. I don’t know what she went through in life or during her previous stints as a Ghost.”

“…Ha-ha-ha.”

“What?”

“I figured as much,” Isuna said, and smiled as he looked at Rain. Rain’s gaze met his, and he saw deep sorrow hidden behind those gentle eyes.

*Huh…?*

“Maybe it’s just my imagination, Rain, but you remind me of myself ten years ago. Back when I was still inexperienced and didn’t understand my relationship with Rim. When I was still young at heart, essentially.”

“Uh, okay?”

“It kind of feels like I’m looking at an old photograph, you know?”

*No, I really don’t…*

Isuna said they were alike, but Rain had no idea what made them similar.

“Let me hazard a guess, Rain.” Isuna paused for breath. “Did you two have a major argument recently?”

“……”

“Yep, that’s the face. Knew it.”

Rain almost asked “How did you know?” but decided against it. His relationship with Air had been awkward lately. There were a lot of reasons for that, but…

“I can tell. Rim and I were the same ten years ago.”

*Ten years ago…*

Isuna hadn’t truly lacked talent when he was younger. Being a mage put him among the cream of the crop, so no ordinary soldier matched him. But when she was alive, Deadrim stood head and shoulders above other mages, so Isuna was constantly compared to her. Back then, he didn’t mind the comparison. Which of them was better didn’t matter much, since they were together. Unfortunately, as they matured, their environment changed…and them with it.

“On the day Rim died, we got into a huge fight.”

They hadn’t stayed close friends forever.

“It was the day I finally got my wish…to stand alongside her on the battlefield. The two of us started arguing because she kept trying to help me. Looking back on it now, I know she pointed out something really obvious, but I got annoyed at the fact she didn’t trust me, so we stopped talking to each other. And the next thing I knew, Rim…”

She died still full of regrets. His story sounded all too common.

The man who’d lost the love of his youth looked directly at Rain, his eyes full of emotion. “Rain, you’re the same as I was back then.”

“How are we the same?”

“We both feel impatient because of a partner who’s far more skilled than we are.”

They were both overwhelmed with frustration at their own lack of experience and maturity.

“I’m not impatient…”

“Have you been opposing her ideas for no good reason?”

“……”

“And that makes it hard for you to talk it out with her, right?”

……

He didn’t have enough fingers to count how many times that had happened. Isuna had probably picked up on their discord from Rain’s expression.

“I think you have a very convenient misunderstanding.”

“What kind of misunderstanding?”

“From your perspective, how would you describe Air?”

“…The ideal mage.”

“Well, for starters, I can tell you that’s not true.”

That belief appeared to be the root cause of their friction.

“The two of them, Deadrim and Air? They’re skilled, but they’re not God or anything. They can be as smart and talented as humanly…well, *in*humanly possible. Since they’re Ghosts and all. But at their very core… they’re normal girls. They’re people, like you and me.”

Rain’s misunderstanding stemmed from his belief that his partner was invincible.

“And that’s why you’re so impatient.”

"……"

"You placed her on a pedestal based on a misconception while assuming she was different from you. You subconsciously decided everything she said was absolute. And so, any little thing she says gives you pause. You value her words more than your own opinions, so you assume they're always true. And that's why they hurt."

When she said he was mistaken…he believed he had no chance of approaching her.

"My one warning to you is…do not make that mistake. Those two are as human as us. They make mistakes, they say unreasonable things, and sometimes they slip up and make wrong decisions. They get careless at times, too. I thought Deadrim would never lose, but she died so easily. That's when I learned."

"But…"

"Should I just lay it on the table, then?"

Isuna's advice was like a knife in Rain's heart as he tried to make sense of all this.

As he watched him, Isuna continued. "Right now, you're angry and sulking at the girl you admire, which is hurting her."

"Ugh…" Rain simply groaned in response, which made Isuna laugh.

"…Ha-ha-ha."

A powerless, feeble voice echoed out from him, but he laughed all the same.

"It's funny. I wish I could've told myself that ten years ago, but saying it now feels good…"

For Rain, the revelation was humiliating. "You…" he started to snap, but then thought better of it.

"Still, I can't exactly talk down to you, can I?" Isuna said, his voice faint. "There's still so much I don't know about Rim. When she first showed up as a Ghost, I thought she'd truly returned to me. She seemed exactly the same as ten years ago. I'd changed, but the fact that she hadn't made me so happy. But once we went out to fight…I quickly realized how wrong I was."

The two of them had fought side by side, both in the past and the present, which had made the change in Deadrim clear to him.

"She's so sadistic now. I don't know if having to keep fighting in a war she hates has warped her somehow, but…"

Rain only knew Deadrim in the present, where he'd seen her brutally slay thirty people, so those words confused him. "She wasn't like that when she was alive?" he asked.

"No. She was the most skilled soldier I'd ever seen, but I never once saw her smile on the battlefield. Nowadays, she's brutal, and she also goes out to fight more often. Though, that's mainly because Kaisei keeps arranging battles for her…"

Kaisei… Rain didn't know what the man looked like, but he'd heard of him. He was an officer of the West who'd been involved in several major

battles. Still, he didn’t have an exceptional track record, so he never left much of an impression.

“Now that I think about it, that man’s been controlling Rim’s actions this whole time. She just did what he said and kept fighting… Maybe if I was more assertive, she would have stayed the Rim I knew instead of becoming Ghost Deadrim…”

Deadrim had changed. She’d learned to enjoy battle more than when she was alive.

“I… I couldn’t do anything. If I’d just told her not to change…”

His consciousness grew hazy. Isuna’s voice gradually weakened.

“I want you two…to achieve it…”

“……”

“The two of us won’t make it. But you two…might still have a chance…” Isuna trailed off, lacking the strength to finish that sentence. He drifted off into weakened slumber.

“Rain, how’s your wound?” Air entered the hut and immediately asked that question.

“I don’t think it’s gotten any worse, but it isn’t any better, either.”

“Right…”

Rain tried to lie to her. Air had only stepped out for a short while, but the bandage on his wound had visibly reddened. It was obviously worse. Air didn’t point out the fact he’d lied, though.

“I’ll remove the bandages and wash them. It’ll hurt, so grit your teeth.”

“It doesn’t hurt that ba— Babababa, aaaaaah!”

“…I told you it was going to hurt.”

She took off the bandage and tried to rinse it in the water they’d found in the hut, but the blood clung to it. Rain lost quite a bit of blood in the process, too. And yet, he still refused to admit the severity of the wound, since he believed speaking about it would only make the situation worse.

*That’s…right…*

She thought back on her relationship with Rain. It took them a great deal of determination to make it that far, and they’d put their lives on the line countless times in the process. And just like all of those times, they had a single goal they wished to prioritize over all else. Ending the cycle of war. And Rain planned to see their mission through to completion, because his life wasn’t…

*……*

She knew Rain wouldn’t last another ten hours. He would only survive if they escaped the mountain before dawn, which meant they had to engage the unidentified forces they’d encountered earlier.

Deadrim’s power seemed unstoppable, but they only had a single Exelia to form their strategy around. Thus, their chances of escaping seemed slim. But conversely, if they stayed hidden, they had a good shot of escaping the enemy’s detection. That made the choice before her obvious, but…

*“I want to know if you wish to save that boy… That’s all.”*

…Deadrim’s words came to mind. Air had no answer to that question… No, she refused to answer it because she didn’t want to destroy the relationship she’d built up with Rain. She didn’t want to invalidate their promise to risk their lives for the mission, so she actively tried to avoid it.

*What…? What should I do…?*

Air finished washing Rain’s bandages and dried them out, the conflict bearing down on her heart all the while. Touching Rain’s body and feeling his warmth reminded her that he still lived, but that would only last another day at best.

*I don’t want that…*

She knew how she truly felt, but acting on her desires felt wrong. Her mind kept going around in circles, asking the same questions, never coming up with any answers.

“Ugh…” Rain suddenly groaned. When she heard him, Air looked up and found herself gazing at Rain’s face.

*Right…*

She always had the option of asking Rain. His life hung by a thread, not hers, so he simply had to decide what to do… That made everything easier for her, as well…

“Um, Rain…,” she said.

“…Air?”

*Ah…!*

However, the moment she met his gaze, the words got stuck in her throat.

*What was I…about to ask him?!*

Her own weakness terrified her, rendering her silent. She knew what his answer would be already. “Sacrifice me and complete your mission.” And she only intended to ask *because* it was so obvious. In other words, she almost discarded the choice entirely because she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

*And I have the gall…the nerve to say I’m risking my life on this mission?! I’m not… I’m not determined in the least!*

When it mattered most, her emotions controlled her. She thought she’d hardened her heart to make the right judgment calls, but when push came to shove, she’d wavered.

“Hmm… You’ve *really* devoted yourself to nursing him back to health, haven’t you?” Deadrim said as she sat against the wall on the other side of the hut.

“Deadrim…”

“Odd, considering you thought of killing him earlier.”

“Ah…!”

“You’d be so much cuter if you were this honest all the time.”

After that, Deadrim looked away and tried to fall asleep. It almost felt like she’d talked in her sleep, but her words rang clearly in Air’s ears.

*“You thought of killing him earlier…”*

Rain had definitely heard those words. Of course, she knew they hadn't bothered him that much. He'd surely already thought of the idea of using the Devil's Bullet to wipe away his own existence. Neither of them had mentioned it, but it was a natural plan.

"Um, Rain…" Air tried to smooth over what Deadrim had said.

"It's fine."

"…Huh?"

Her gaze was fixed on Rain's, with her thoughts running around in circles. However, the boy simply spoke to her in an emotionless voice.

"It's only natural, really. I'd consider it if I were in your shoes, too. Who could you erase to get us out of this? It's obvious… The answer to that question is…me."

Rain sounded almost frighteningly indifferent as he said that. His words sounded honest and true. But seeing him like that…

*Why…?*

…filled Air's heart with discomfort and pain.

*How can you be so…so calm and collected about this?!*

Rain had definitely heard what Deadrim had said. He'd heard that Air planned to shoot him with the Devil's Bullet. That meant the girl who nursed him was actually thinking of how to coldly dispose of him. Still, it didn't fluster him at all. In other words…

*He thinks it's obvious…*

…Rain thought it made sense for Air to abandon him. And so, it didn't bother him. He believed Air could erase others to achieve her goal because she was a Ghost, a being that killed others. It didn't surprise him at all. To him, it was obvious.

*Aaah…*

Air suddenly felt something roll down her cheeks.

"Huh…?"

Droplets. Water was trailing down her cheeks.

"Why…?"

At first, she assumed the roof had leaked. But no matter how many she wiped away, more replaced them. Finally, she realized they were tears from her own eyes.

*It can't be. Why…?*

She tried to hold them back, but nothing worked. Her tears overflowed like a dam had burst, so using her hands to close her eyes did little to stop them. It didn't feel like she was crying. She'd kept her emotions tightly in check. She had no reason to cry, but it still happened.

*Why…?!*

"A-Air?!" Rain barked, taken aback by the sight. "What's gotten into you?!"

The girl beside him started crying as she looked straight into his eyes. Her expression remained as stable as before, but tears were running down her face. Of course that confused him.

*Why…?!*

Upon seeing Rain finally lose his composure, Air spoke her mind.

“Why…?”

“Huh?”

“Why does…this surprise you when…?”

“…Air?”

“Why does this surprise you when…you weren’t even shocked before? You know I plan to kill you, so how can you stay so composed…? How can you be so calm right now?!”

Her outburst sounded unreasonable. They’d both agreed to a relationship where they used each other to achieve their mutual goal, so Rain’s reaction seemed apt. If one of them got in the way of their objective, they would need to disappear. Those were the stakes they’d agreed on. And yet, Air seemingly hated that idea.

*Why is this making me so mad?*

His reactions shocked her, despite how obvious they were.

“Why are you so…nonchalant about all this?!”

Trust—that was what she subconsciously wanted from him. A person who’d been betrayed by a partner should have appeared shocked and gotten angry. But if the traitor was someone they never believed in, they wouldn’t bat an eye. Rain showed no surprise at the idea, which meant he’d never once truly trusted her.

“Ngh, gaaah…!”

“Ah, Air, you… D-don’t cry…!”

Tears had started streaming down her face before she even realized why, but her emotions soon caught up to them. The corners of her eyes turned hot, and her nose was stinging. She tried to stop it, but soon she was sobbing like a child. Air had finally figured out how Rain saw her, so of course she lost all control.

*I… I thought I understood everything, but…*

They’d held each other’s secrets and moved forward while sharing the same goal. They had something they wished to accomplish and were willing to sacrifice anything to have their way… They’d marched forward, together, with resolve in their hearts.

However, as they worked together, a different emotion had blossomed in Air’s heart. One she’d hoped Rain shared.

*I’m so…pathetic…*

She didn’t know when, but she’d started to hope. And that hope had been denied, reducing her to tears. Sadness filled her heart. That saccharine emotion had governed her actions before she’d even realized she felt that way.

*This is so…embarrassing. What was I even expecting?*

She’d decried Deadrim’s actions earlier, but Air was no different in the end. Emotion had bound her as well, so how could she tell her to ignore her personal feelings?

Air was ashamed to realize she’d pretended to act objectively. And when coupled with the fact that Rain didn’t trust her, she lost control entirely.

“…I should probably say this just to make things clear,” Rain said. “You’re wrong, Air.”

“Huh…?”

“I mean, I don’t know how it looks but, I, uh…feel pretty bad about this.”

“…About what?”

“Seeing you waver.”

“…What?”

“I’m serious. I wouldn’t lie…”

“Huh…?” Air prepared to argue, but Rain coiled his arms around her and drew her in.

“I wouldn’t lie to you. Not now, at least.”

Air’s petite form made no effort to resist, allowing him to draw her into an embrace. She buried her face into Rain’s chest.

*Her body’s so small. She really is…so small.*

Even as he held her tightly, it didn’t feel like she was all there. She felt so fleeting that Rain worried she might snap in his grip. But he just tightened his grip and held her close.

“…I don’t need you to coddle me,” she mumbled. While she feigned composure, she was clearly shocked. She’d steeled her resolve already, but emotion still rippled through her heart.

“I’m only doing this because I want to. Plus, to be honest, I could use a bit of coddling, myself.”

“…Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, aren’t you delicate. *Especially* considering how sturdy your body is.”

As Air spoke, her arms snaked around his back, responding to his emotions. The strength of her grip stung Rain’s wound and sent a considerable jolt of pain through him. Still, there was something else he wished to convey first.

“Air.”

“…What?”

“I’m leaving my life in your hands. If it’s necessary, cut me away whenever you see fit. You can’t let your feelings get in the way. That’s the

cross we both have to bear in exchange for the Devil's Bullet. We can't waver when the time comes, no matter what."

"…You're right."

Rain was scolding both Air, who had faltered on her path, and himself, who had started having second thoughts. However—

"If we both make it out of this alive…I want to talk. I'm a bit slow on the uptake, so there's some stuff I wanna discuss with you. That all right?"

"……" Air said nothing. She simply let the strength of her embrace serve as her answer.

# 6. SKIRMISH ON THE SNOWSCAPE

“This has been fun, but I think it’s time for us to leave,” Deadrim said first thing in the morning.

It was slightly after six, and the sun started to rise over the snowy mountain. They’d mulled over whether to stay put or find some way through the enemy forces for quite a while, but Deadrim had proposed a plan they’d liked, so they eventually chose the latter.

“Let me tell you about my Bullet Magic.”

“You’ll reveal the full extent of your blue bullet’s power?”

“Yes. I don’t like the idea of exposing my secrets, but I’ll do whatever it takes to save Isuna. Once I explain how it works, you’ll see how high our chances really are.”

Deadrim began her explanation, exposing her biggest secret.

“It grants me the power to shift the position of anything it touches at will. You’ve already seen it in action once, right? The only requirement is direct contact with the bullet itself. Weight and other characteristics of whatever it touches don’t matter. So long as I perceive it as a single object, I can shift its position.”

A singular object. In other words—

“I need to clearly discern something as being a singular mass. For example…the ground, the mountain, and the sea are too well-connected and vast, so I can’t move them. However, the ice that made up the surface of the lake had a limited scope that I could see, so I moved it.”

That meant she could move anything, assuming it wasn’t as large as a piece of terrain.

“What I’m saying is, moving a single Exelia is exceptionally easy. And that’s why, as long as we can evade their fire for at least some time, I can shift us out of their siege.”

She could teleport matter from one spot to another with essentially no limitations.

“…That’s insane,” Rain muttered. He once again realized how abnormal Ghosts were. They all had powers that completely overturned the very concept of strategy.

“But I do have something of a *weakness*, I suppose.”

That made sense. If she truly had no limitations, she wouldn’t have needed any help.

“If I try to move something beyond a sixty-five-foot radius centered around me, my accuracy drops dramatically.”

“Your accuracy?”

“The object’s vertical and horizontal positions shift.”

“…Come again?”

“An Exelia appears upside down, with its driver seats against the ground. Or a human lands on their head.”

In other words, moving something too far away was out of the question.

“…That’s potentially fatal.”

“Right. A toppled Exelia is no better than scrap metal. But just think about it—as long as we’re moving within a sixty-five-foot radius, I can repeatedly teleport an Exelia as many times as I want. Do you understand?”

They had to get close enough for the enemy to detect them, but despite that, their chances of escaping seemed extremely high.

“We’re handicapped in terms of speed because all four of us are riding in a single Exelia, but my bullet can nullify that disadvantage. I think it’s a gamble worth taking.”

In other words, they planned to break through by relying on Deadrim’s bullet. And since they had no other plausible ideas, they had to pick that option.

The routes north out of the ravine were limited, and fifteen minutes into the operation…

Air drove their Exelia through a forested area as the morning glow washed over the sky. The obstacles in that route made it hard for the enemy to detect them. However, once they exited the forest, they reached an open field. And as soon as they did, before they even progressed three hundred feet, Rain saw it.

*This is…a bombardment…!*

Air immediately took a sharp right turn, trying to skid their unit into the snow. As soon as she took that evasive action, the ground right next to them exploded. They’d evaded a direct hit, but Bullet Magic almost destroyed them.

“Air!”

“I know!”

The enemy had fired at them. A swift look around the field told them they were surrounded by white Exelias of unknown affiliation. They were the units that had attacked them the day before.

They’d camouflaged themselves amid the snow and tried to fire at them stealthily. However, they were too far to hit with pinpoint accuracy, so there was no reason for Rain’s group to engage them. Their objective was to force their way through, after all.

Unfortunately, Rain’s Qualia foresaw more enemy fire from straight ahead, as if the initial bombardment was a signal to commence their operation.

*Again…!*

A surge of fire approached them. This Bullet Magic didn’t release massive fire from a single blast, but instead scattered like buckshot…the

Dark Explosive spell, Krad Ruel. It seemed like the perfect suppressive fire over a wide area. And since they were caught in a pincer attack, it *should have* hit. However, at that moment, Rain's field of vision turned dark.

*Ah…!*

A sense of vertigo struck him. And then…

"The enemy's pretty good."

…he was looking at a completely different scene. The sun had been to their right mere moments ago, but now it was in front of them. They were thirty-odd feet away from where the Bullet Magic had exploded. Snow soared up into the sky and rained back down.

"Deadrim…"

"I'll handle evasive maneuvers," Deadrim said with one hand on the Exelia, while her other gripped the blue bullet. "For the time being, focus on keeping our distance, Air."

Deadrim aptly handled the enemy fire. No matter how skilled a manipulator was, being surrounded by multiple Exelias placed them at a major disadvantage. Air was no exception to that rule, so the enemy's fire grazed them despite her best efforts. Luckily, each time they faced real danger…

"I'm shifting us."

…Deadrim gave a verbal cue and evaded the enemy's attacks. Her ability to reposition was especially valuable in a battle of mages, where Qualia provided advanced information. The enemy fire simply had no chance of hitting them.

Unfortunately, as the battle raged on, the enemy slowly gathered reinforcements.

*Dammit…*

Six units. Those were likely all the units they'd deployed to recover the second-generation Exelia. And once they'd consolidated their forces, Rain and his group were surrounded and exposed to enemy fire.

*Goddammit…!*

They failed. The enemy's formation refused to crumble. Deadrim kept changing their unit's position, and Air drove with precise, elaborate movements in an attempt to break the blockade, but their numbers foiled all attempts.

They braked suddenly to shake off one unit, but another soon filled its space. The moment Deadrim tried to shift them through a gap, a hail of Bullet Magic greeted them.

The skirmish consumed the entire snowscape. Vehicles sped across it, unleashing one blast after another as they tore up the ground. It hadn't even been five minutes, but the number of bullets fired was well into triple digits. Rain's group never once took a direct hit, but they had to change their strategy.

They'd focused on dodging so far, but they knew they had to start attacking to pry open a hole in their formation.

“We need to go on the offensive,” Air said. “If we can whittle them down to half their current numbers… No, even just two-thirds will do. If we can do that, we can escape.”

If they wanted to break the siege, they needed to take down at least two enemy Exelias. However, Air and Isuna were both manipulators, while Deadrim had to focus on shifting them to evade attacks. That meant only Rain could do anything. Unfortunately…

*My mana…*

…he no longer had the ability to fire Bullet Magic. His chest wound had gradually whittled away his life. He’d lost so much blood by that point that he could barely see. Plus, his hands could no longer grip a rifle.

His Qualia remained active, but he had no way to fire Bullet Magic with any degree of accuracy. Still, he knew it was only a matter of time before they got hit at that rate. He needed some way to shoot, some way to create an opening for Air and Deadrim…

*Ah…!*

At the end of his deliberation, Rain came up with a plan.

“Air, I’m going to use the spare steering wheel.”

“Why…?”

“We can return fire with this unit.”

Rain took hold of the steering wheel attached to the flank of the manipulator’s seat. An unlocked trigger rested on it. Turning the wheel allowed him to freely swerve the Exelia’s cannon, while pressing down the trigger let him shoot. Though, instead of his Bullet Magic, it used the Turret Model’s mechanical cannon.

*It’s more or less the same as firing a rifle…*

They’d already confirmed its firepower and accuracy. If he operated it accurately, it would fire an attack on par with Bullet Magic. A direct hit would down an enemy.

Rain had discovered a way to attack even in his weakened state.

*I can take down two of them with this and cut open a path…!*

Rain concentrated as the battle continued. Thus far, they’d focused entirely on defense. Even with Deadrim constantly shifting their position, their enemy still surrounded them. But that also meant they were focused solely on offense.

*I have to find a moment where they can’t possibly dodge!*

Rain placed his finger on the trigger, then breathed out and let his thoughts accelerate as he focused on his Qualia.

One unit chased them from behind. It remained cautious of Deadrim’s unnatural movements and refused to close the gap. Instead, it simply followed them while keeping a careful eye out.

*There…!*

But its position decided the battle. Rain swerved the turret to face behind them and pressed the trigger. The moment he did, it filled up with heat that fired off a second later.

The enemy perceived the linear shot with their own Qualia, prompting them to dodge. The blast tore through empty space and crashed into the ground…before it suddenly rebounded.

“Ah…!”

The enemy soldier’s eyes widened, and the next moment, an explosion resounded. The blast leaped back at the Exelia, which found itself helpless to dodge, and scored a direct hit to the fuselage.

“Wow.” Deadrim raised her voice in amazement. “Pharel, huh? I’ve never seen someone use it so well.”

*This unit is incredible…*

Rain didn’t feel relief as he shot down the enemy. Quite the opposite, in fact. Intense doubt filled him; seeing that shot had confirmed his suspicions. There was more to the Turret-Model Exelia than met the eye.

*There’s something different about it…*

It wasn’t simply a rig that had a cannon attached to it. It had far more features. Rain’s Bullet Magic should only have worked with a gun, but imagining a Pharel shot when he pulled the trigger had created one in the cannon. That should have been impossible. And yet, it had actually happened. A spell that only mages could activate had been unleashed by a mechanical cannon.

……

This technology went far beyond all current Bullet Magic research.

*I might be riding a real mechanical monster…*

For the time being, he returned his attention to the battle at hand. They’d destroyed one enemy unit, but the remaining five still moved about cautiously. Rain just needed to destroy one more Exelia, so he had to make use of that chance. And so, he quickly turned the turret’s sights toward his next target.

Their flawless formation had crumbled due to the loss of a unit, so they were no longer as perfectly positioned as before. They’d mostly concentrated their numbers at the front to block any hope of escape, which meant there was suddenly a hole behind them that one enemy scrambled to cover.

*…There!*

Rain decided to make that Exelia his next target. He reached for the trigger, aligned his sights, and fired at the ideal moment.

*This is it…*

Realizing the cannon reflected the abilities of the mage who fired it, Rain poured his mana into the shot and prepared to pull the trigger. However…

*Ah…!*

…his hand stopped, not out of indecision or fear, but because of a sense of impending danger.

When he’d fingered the trigger, he knew death was near.

*This is…*

His Qualia had alerted him of danger aside from the enemy. He'd foreseen it the moment he poured his mana into the cannon; the sheer volume would make the barrel inflate and explode.

*If I shot at them just now…we would've been blown sky-high…* His heart thumped in his chest like an alarm bell due to the revelation. He was relieved that he'd avoided that danger. It seemed the Turret-Model Exelia produced such an unusual amount of heat that adding more mana would've created an explosion.

……

Something was off about the unit, for sure. It hid a great deal of power but also contained danger; misuse spelled doom for them. And not knowing that had cost Rain a priceless chance. He'd let the perfect opportunity slip by.

*Dammit… When the hell will another opening appear?!*

But just as a wave of regret washed over him, a flat voice rang out from behind.

"Oh, I think this distance will do."

Deadrim's voice.

"It's a good thing I can move."

Shortly after saying those words…

…she appeared atop a nearby enemy unit, towering over the riders.

"Now, then."

She traversed the sixty-foot gap in an instant with sword in hand, then slashed down at the manipulator's head. The blade slid through his cranium, sending his face flying. Blood spurted out of the cross section like a crimson flower.

"My apologies, but…," Deadrim said as she leaped at the other man operating the Exelia. "…I'll be taking this unit."

She sliced him diagonally down from the shoulder, cutting the soldier through the torso. The resulting fountain of blood stained both the windshield and her, but she didn't flinch. She just grabbed the man's head roughly and dragged him off his seat.

"Now, let's see," Deadrim murmured as she lifted the man's corpse. "Maybe they'll reconsider and decide to run once they see this."

No, at that point, the thing she held wasn't a corpse. She'd slashed its torso open, so veritable waterfalls of blood spilled from the wound, but…

"Gaaah, aaah…!"

…he remained alive. The man groaned loudly in pain, but Deadrim ignored it. Instead, she simply held him up like some distorted objet d'art.

"A wise decision."

After a few moments, the enemy stopped trying to catch up to them. The remaining four units simply circled in place, giving up on their previous coordinated actions. One of their units had been destroyed, while the enemy had seized another. They suddenly faced a four-on-two scenario, which had them hesitating and weighing their options.

“Tch… Irritating little shits!”

Impatient, Deadrim pierced the man she held through the stomach. Repeatedly, as if running a needle through a cloth. The still-living soldier screamed and thrashed, but she kept punching new holes into his body with practiced motions. And despite it all, the man wasn’t afforded death. Deadrim always avoided his vitals.

“……”

Eventually, the four units fell back. Perhaps they’d concluded they stood no chance in a four-on-two battle, or maybe Deadrim’s ghastly execution of their comrade made them lose heart.

*…We won?*

The battle had ended. They overcame the six-to-one disadvantage and emerged victorious. At that point, they simply had to take the shortest route off the mountain and escape to safety.

Rain had suffered a deep wound, so his odds of survival remained low, but they’d at least managed to secure a chance. They had to get moving, fast, to capitalize on it. And yet—

*This is…* Rain quickly realized what had happened. Neither of the two remaining units moved. Air and Rain remained aboard an O’ltmenia unit, while Deadrim rode the unit she stole from the enemy with Isuna. Only three feet separated them as they stood in absolute silence. However, the standoff only lasted ten-odd seconds.

“Air.” Deadrim spoke to them through a wireless transmission. “My Bullet Magic is exceptionally strong.”

Her cold voice sounded somewhat different from her normal tone.

“Its official name is the Crystalline Bullet. The first time I used it, those words popped into my mind.”

She held the power of the blue bullet, which governed spatial shifting. The Crystalline Bullet, which drew on the Achiral divinity of the Crystalians.

“It has its fair share of limitations, but be it in combat, in open spaces, or assassinations, it allows me to turn the tide of battle. And so, it’s too risky to let anyone who knows the full extent of its power live.”

The two units faced each other as the transmission continued. Deadrim stood over the gunner’s seat, still gripping the dying soldier, while Isuna lowered himself into the manipulator seat with staggered breaths.

“And most importantly, I need that second-generation Exelia. That cutting-edge model is unique enough to draw the attention of an unidentified army. I’s essential that we possess it. I’d gladly give it up in exchange for Isuna’s life, but the enemy has fallen back, so he has more time.”

Rain and Air felt clear, palpable bloodlust as the ebony Ghost spoke with utter indifference.

“Deadrim, ” Air answered Deadrim’s transmission. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t say I understand you, and I don’t care to try to sympathize with you, either. But I do know that, as fellow Ghosts, we’re both working toward the exact same objective.”

Deadrim wanted to end the war. She’d said as much the prior night. She truly wished to break herself and Isuna free from the curse of fighting.

Air had sensed no falsehood in her words. There was no need for them to kill each other. Rather than fighting, they should have joined forces…

“No, Air.” Deadrim cut her off and shook her head before Air uttered another word. “If we’d met under different circumstances, that might have been possible. But as things stand, that’ll never happen. We need the second-generation Exelia for our plans, and you won’t ever hand it over. Plus, Isuna’s injured, and I can’t rely on the West or the East to treat him.”

Deadrim had already betrayed Harborant, and O’ltmenia would never treat a defector’s wounds. If she wished to save Isuna, they needed to get to another country.

“I don’t want to fight you, either, Air. We share the same goal, and you have a kind heart. Someone like you is so hard to come by… But considering the situation, we can’t hope to cooperate.” Deadrim let go of the man. “Besides, this is my greatest and final chance to obtain the second-generation Exelia. All I have to do…is get rid of you two.”

She swung her sword horizontally, splitting the man in half. His body tumbled down, scattering over the snow in a lurid picture of violence. Most people would have averted their gaze in terror or disgust, but Rain kept his eyes fixed on her.

*Ah…!*

Through the blood spatter, he spotted Deadrim drawing a pistol.

“Rain!”

Right after Air called his name, their Exelia turned around and sped away. They drove at maximum speed, putting as much distance between themselves and Deadrim as possible.

Not once did they look back as they rushed away. They knew what was behind them—death and bloodlust.

# 7. VERSUS DEADRIM

Air quickly took cover in a dense forest while Deadrim relentlessly attacked them. Looking back, Rain saw the white Exelia close behind them. Isuna sat in the manipulator's seat and drove the unfamiliar unit skillfully. He made sure Rain and Air didn't gain too much ground.

Deadrim said he'd gained more time, but Isuna's wound still seemed rather deep. And yet, it didn't impact his driving skills in the slightest. Deadrim's partner, Isuna Cole, was clearly skilled. He'd once described himself as average, but under normal circumstances, he would have been a top military manipulator. He'd built up considerable experience since Deadrim died, which granted him skills that perfectly complemented Deadrim's abilities with Bullet Magic.

Rain and Air, on the other hand, had no means of striking back. Rain still found himself unable to grip his rifle steadily, while Air had just been evading six enemy units. Her steering grew less steady by the minute. Their opponent was a powerful Ghost, which placed them in a bind.

"Ah…! Rain! Hold tight!" Air shouted just as massive trees rained down in front of them. She rapidly applied the brakes to prevent their Exelia from colliding with them, but the recoil almost made them topple sideways.

*Ugh…!*

Rain forced his limbs to move. His wound throbbed sharply, but he withstood it and managed to fix his posture as they accelerated again.

The impact of the trees crashing into the ground rattled the air. Their size suggested they weighed thousands of pounds, so they knew if they didn't evade, their Exelia would be crushed like cardboard.

Unfortunately, the enemy's attack didn't stop there. More trees rained down on them incessantly, impeding their path. They felt no need to even turn around and check for the source.

*Deadrim!*

She'd clearly used the Crystalline Bullet to shift the positions of the trees in the forest, hoping to block Rain and Air. Her power hadn't shown its true worth earlier, when they were on a large and empty snowscape, but a forest filled with obstacles suited her perfectly. Anything with great mass served as her weapon.

Air managed to avoid her vicious attacks, but Rain couldn't imagine how this would end well.

*This is slowly going downhill…*

They didn’t have any way to return fire. Any Bullet Magic they shot required multiple attempts, which seemed out of the question. Even the Turret Model ran dry.

*Think...* Rain focused his thoughts, hoping to discover a way out. Air had concentrated entirely on evading, so he had to come up with a plan.

*There has to be something I’m missing...*

He needed to hit an opponent who could freely change their position at will, which meant hitting her from the front was out of the question. If he tried to shoot her and she saw, she simply had to shift away, like he’d seen her do so many times before.

Did she have a weakness? Rain thought back to Deadrim’s earlier words.

*If I try to move something beyond a sixty-five-foot radius centered around me, my accuracy drops dramatically.*

Deadrim had revealed one of the few limitations the Crystalline Bullet had. She had no true limit on distance, but she had to stick to short-range moves if she cared about positioning. Put another way, so long as orientation didn’t matter, she was essentially invincible. She could send anything, anywhere in a flash, no matter the distance.

*...Wait, send anything, anywhere?*

The thought confused him. He repeated those words internally and realized something didn’t add up.

*What is it? What am I doubting here?*

However, even as he racked his brain, Deadrim continued her assault. Like a game of chess advancing toward a preordained checkmate, Air’s evasive patterns got cut off one by one.

Their exchange continued, with Deadrim dealing blows that threatened to narrow their options down to zero. Rain turned around and saw the enemy unit about 150 feet away. Deadrim constantly sent trees and boulders their way from that distance, but...

*Oh, I see!*

...that made something click in Rain’s mind.

*That’s what’s bothering me! Why didn’t Deadrim...?*

Rain recalled the events of the previous day. The train had gotten blown off the tracks and it fell down the cliff, forcing the four of them to work together to find a way out. But that made no sense, since Deadrim had had her special bullet all along.

*Why didn’t she shift back up after we fell down here?*

Her blue bullet allowed her to shift the position of objects freely. With that power, she could have easily returned to the rails. That would have been the shortest route possible off the snowy mountain, as well.

*Did she stay behind to steal the second-generation Exelia?*

No, that didn’t sound right. She had no reason to risk staying on the mountain when she could have simply stolen a different prototype. Second-generation Exelias were rare and valuable, but there was more than one on the train.

*Does that mean she stayed behind for Isuna?*

That made no sense, either. If her first priority really was Isuna's life, then she had all the more reason to return to the rails and escape the mountain. Honestly, Rain couldn't think of any reason she wouldn't have climbed up the cliff right away, which meant the answer wasn't that Deadrim didn't want to shift up the mountain.

It was that she *couldn't*. And there had to be a logical explanation why.

*……*

All the information Rain had came together and guided him to an answer. A snowy mountain. The four of them being isolated. The second-generation Exelia. An unidentified army. Magic that shifted the position of objects. And…the incessant snowfall.

*No way…!*

Rain looked up at the sky and spotted a curtain of gray clouds and, of course, the snow fluttering down toward them. He tried to look farther ahead, but the thin, white clouds impeded vision. The visibility remained as poor as the prior day.

"…Air."

Rain came up with a theory he believed was right.

"What is it? I'm busy."

"I have a plan. Play along."

He'd figured how to stop the murderous Ghost.

"We'll shoot Deadrim down."

"…You've come up with some silly idea, haven't you?"

"The timing's going to be critical. If we're even a second off, we're goners."

"Then we'll just have to execute it perfectly. Go on, tell me."

Rain told Air what he'd surmised based on their information. He told her Deadrim's probable weakness.

"It's worth gambling on," Air replied once he finished speaking. "If nothing else, it should surprise her."

"So—about the timing…"

"It shouldn't be too hard when we're sitting this close. Try clenching your arm."

Rain looked down at his chest. The two of them shared the same cockpit, with Air sitting between his legs. His arm extended to the cannon's trigger, so her body rested right next to his. It felt as small and soft as ever, but that tiny form seemed more reliable than anything else in that situation.

*Air…*

In that moment, he realized he didn't want to lose her. That powerful emotion washed over his heart and curbed his fear before they began an operation that was likely to fail.

"Let's go," Air said, giving him the signal.

Their Exelia had only been driving to avoid the trees thus far, but as soon as she said that, she let go of the gas pedal and pulled up the clutch at the same time.

*Ah…!*

They suddenly braked, but their unit didn't stop in place. The momentum sent it into a leap, which Air used to rotate the Exelia's bearing midair. As soon as they landed, she kicked the Exelia into reverse, driving backward as the turret faced the unit chasing after them…Deadrim's white Exelia.

Deadrim didn't so much as flinch as she continued to close in on them. She appeared confident that she'd evade even a direct shot. Her only offensive option was to launch large masses at them, but if she got close enough, she'd be able to shift right onto their Exelia and cut them down. They were dead the moment she got within sixty-five feet.

*One hundred twenty-five feet… One hundred fifteen feet… One hundred feet…*

"I'm braking," Air said as she stomped firmly onto the brakes. And once she did, the distance between them shrank.

Eighty feet.

*Now…!*

Rain squeezed the trigger. The second-generation Exelia's turret unleashed a shot of pure heat…straight into the ground.

"Eat this!"

The sound of an earsplitting explosion surrounded them. But instead of hitting the enemy, their blast struck the ground. Deadrim's unit remained completely unharmed. However, Rain hadn't missed his shot.

Like he'd planned, a cloud of white smoke enveloped the entire area.

"What?!" they heard Deadrim exclaim in surprise over the wireless transmission. She'd realized the smoke was intentional. The powerful heat cannon instantly evaporated the snow, which created a layer of fog when exposed to the cold air. And it also served to prove Rain's hypothesis.

*I knew it!*

Deadrim didn't shift away despite their odd trick—and everything clicked.

*She can't shift away.*

The fog hanging over the area impeded her blue bullet's powers.

*Deadrim can only shift things to places she can see!*

Rain had surmised there was some kind of preliminary condition, some kind of limitation on her ability to shift things that explained why she hadn't gone up the cliff. And whatever that factor was, it had to have been in effect when they fell off the train.

*I'm so glad I figured it out…*

That condition was visibility. The bad weather when they crashed had covered them with fog, so she had no way to see the top of the cliff. And so, Deadrim had no choice but to rely on Rain and Air to escape the mountain.

In other words, they simply had to *cut off her field of vision* to render her blue bullet useless.

"Isuna!" Deadrim roared as she likely realized their plan. The distance between them narrowed to sixty-five feet, close enough for her to see Air and Rain directly. She planned to shift herself and hack them to death.

Luckily, Rain's whole strategy relied on that rash action.

*She fell for it!*

His hand gripped the trigger again, but he didn't fire immediately. Attacking randomly would do no good against an ace manipulator like Isuna. He'd evade even at close range, and Rain and Air had no hope of getting in a second shot.

They either took them out in one blow…or died. Rain had to make sure they couldn't avoid his attack.

*Now!*

He focused his Qualia as if firing Bullet Magic.

*Ugh…*

Heat swelled up in the turret. He could feel a massive amount charging, nothing like a normal shot. During their battle on the snowscape, Rain had been too terrified to fire. But now he had to risk everything. He'd realized the machine didn't simply imitate Bullet Magic, so he just had to make use of the Turret-Model Exelia's true capabilities.

*Here goes nothing!*

Rain pulled the trigger.

"Ah…!"

The shot he unleashed became a blinding flash…and blew the forest in front of them off the map.

The heat blast from the barrel greatly exceeded the firepower of normal Bullet Magic. It blew through the snowy forest and left a crater in the ground hundreds of feet away, while the trees in its path were charred and cindered. The attack reduced over half of their immediate field of vision to scorched earth.

*…What the hell?! How does something this powerful even exist?!*

Rain released the trigger as exhaustion and shock overwhelmed him.

*I knew it'd be powerful, but...*

Its output had been over ten times what Rain had expected. It blew the forest away entirely. He shuddered, imagining a power like this deployed en masse. He didn't even want to think of the sheer havoc they would wreak.

Deadrim's unit, which had taken the blast head-on, had toppled over some distance away with its armor completely melted.

*...Wait, hold on; the armor melted?!*

Graimar-nuclear-alloy armor could withstand thousands of degrees of heat, but the Turret Model's blast rendered it powerless. Like ice against fire.

He never imagined the second-generation Exelia would be so powerful… Thinking about it sent shivers down Rain's spine once more.

"Rain."

"…I know."

Still, they didn't have time to stop and admire its handiwork. After Air prodded him, Rain got out of their Exelia and touched down on the ground. The impact of the fall sent a jolt of pain through his body…and his wound started bleeding again.

"Here," Air said as she lent him her shoulder. "It won't be long now. There's only one thing left to do."

"…Right."

Thanks to her support, he made it to the ruins of Deadrim's unit. Once they got there, the sight of Isuna's black, charred body greeted them.

"……"

The sight disturbed Rain. He had melted; it was hard to tell his body was ever shaped like a human at all. The ebony Ghost's body was right next to it.

"Deadrim…"

Her body didn't look nearly as bad as Isuna's, but a good half had turned black. She'd likely dived for cover and landed on her side as the blast hit, which helped her evade a fatal wound.

"Agh…"

She probably only had moments left to live no matter what, but even with half her body burned, she clung to life.

"Rain," Air said, looking down at her. "I'll leave the choice to use it up to you. You should decide for yourself."

She relinquished the key decision to him.

"If we shoot Deadrim with the Devil's Bullet, history will change, and we'll have safely delivered the second-generation Exelia to its destination. If she ceases to exist, everything that happened on this mountain will be undone."

"……"

The Devil's Bullet. A transcendent power that wiped anyone it pierced from the history books. If they shot Deadrim with it, the incident on the

mountain would never have even happened. After all, no one other than the ebony Ghost could have launched such an absurd surprise attack on a moving train. And most importantly—

*My wound…*

The hole in Rain's chest had already robbed him of most of his strength. He'd managed to stand upright thanks to Air's support, but if she let go of him, he'd collapse at once. If things didn't change, he likely wouldn't even survive another hour. And so—

"Deadrim…," Rain muttered as he fixed his gun, loaded with the silver bullet, on the wounded girl. "You were quite the warrior."

Even holding up his pistol felt like torture at that point, but Rain gripped it as tightly as possible out of respect for her. However, right when he prepared to pull the trigger…

"Ah…!"

…Rain's left leg suddenly buckled, which made him tumble to his knees. He looked down, sensing something tug at him. And when he did, he noticed it was Isuna, the one who'd been burned to a crisp.

"Wait… Please…," he mumbled. "Heh-heh-heh… First time I've had to… play dead…"

His wounds were absolutely fatal, but it appeared he still had a few moments left in him.

"But thanks to that…I heard something interesting…"

"Isuna, you're…"

"The Devil's Bullet…you said…"

His burned skin spasmed, and he could barely move. His throat appeared to be crushed; his voice was hoarse.

"I knew…Ghosts had unusual abilities, but…a bullet that erases people from existence…? Ha-ha-ha… How absurd…"

Isuna had listened in on Rain and Air's exchange. He knew about the Devil's Bullet, as well as their plan to shoot Deadrim with it.

*……*

Rain ignored Isuna's hold on his leg and fixed his muzzle on Deadrim again, but…

"Ugh…!"

…the man suddenly tightened his grip like a vise.

"Stop it," Rain said as he looked down at Isuna. His strength was unnatural for a dying man.

"…Could you use that bullet…on me instead?"

"…What?"

"If I didn't exist…Deadrim would never have become a Ghost…"

Isuna Cole, the boy who'd lost Deadrim ten years ago, begged them for help.

"She didn't resurrect for no reason… She only appeared again because… powerful emotions bound her to the world… And those likely only existed… because she died in front of me."

All Ghosts harbored powerful grudges. Deadrim had died in front of the boy she loved. On a day that should have been special and celebratory, they'd disagreed over something trivial. Then Deadrim had perished while holding on to that regret.

"If I didn't exist, Rim, she…would have died…and stayed dead…" Isuna's voice grew fainter as his strength left him. "Becoming a Ghost made her sadistic. She used to hate having to hold a weapon, but now she uses a sword…and takes pleasure…in killing people…

"P-please…," he continued with all the energy he could muster. "I can't… forgive myself for letting her go around killing people as a Ghost…and wiping away the pride she had when she was alive… And I…can't bear the thought of her never existing in the first place…"

Thus, he wished for another outcome entirely.

"If you erase me, Deadrim's Ghost will be wiped out… Please…"

The grip on Rain's leg slackened. Isuna had lost consciousness. He clearly only had a few moments left until he passed on.

"……"

Rain shook off Isuna's hands, resisting the pull of emotion, and pointed his gun at Deadrim once more.

"Wait!" Air exclaimed, stopping him. Then she walked up to Deadrim, squatted before her half-burned body, and reached into her exposed innards. Rain wasn't sure what she was doing at first, but when she withdrew her hand, he saw a bullet in her bloodstained palm.

"Ugh, gross…," Rain muttered. But even through the blood, he saw the vivid black color of the metal.

*Isn't that…?*

A jet-black bullet was hidden within Deadrim's body.

"What's that bullet…?" Rain asked.

"A pact bullet," Air answered.

"Pact? You mean like…?"

"Yes, the same bullet I shot into you. This is Bullet Magic all Ghosts share. One that allows us to control other beings in exchange for sharing our power with them."

Her explanation sounded familiar to Rain. When he'd gained the power of the Devil's Bullet, Air had shot him with that very same bullet. Due to that, she could order him to do anything at any time, even kill himself if she felt so inclined.

But something didn't add up. Why was a pact bullet inside Deadrim's… *inside a Ghost's…*body?

"It's simple, really…," Air said, gritting her teeth in visible anger. "Another Ghost shot this pact bullet into Deadrim to force her to fight."

A pact bullet could only be used by a Ghost, but it worked on both living humans and Ghosts. When the bullet activated, it etched the shooter's name onto it, so Air wiped away the blood in order to examine it.

"The person responsible is…Kaisei. Kaisei Reisman."

Isuna had mentioned that name to Rain the prior night.

*“Though, that’s mainly because Kaisei keeps arranging battles for her…”*

He was a man who ostensibly supported Deadrim.

“Kaisei… Deadrim mentioned him,” Air said, seemingly also familiar with the name.

*……*

They only had circumstantial evidence, but everything fit perfectly.

*“She used to hate having to hold a weapon, but now she uses a sword… and takes pleasure…in killing people…”*

According to what Isuna had said, Deadrim’s behavior had changed. During battle, she’d acted entirely unlike how she used to in life. If that change had happened due to the bullet in her…then she’d likely been under Kaisei’s sway without even knowing it.

“Do you think this Kaisei forced Deadrim to fight?”

“Well, we don’t have any definite proof, but it makes sense to assume that,” Air said as she reached into her shirt and pulled out a black bullet dangling from her neck. She’d once said it contained her soul.

“This bullet is similar to the accessory I carry, which originally turned me into a Ghost. If it’s truly the same as mine, then this Kaisei person might not even be a Ghost…” Air paused for breath. “He might be the one who created the Ghosts in the first place.”

“That’s…”

“Yes, a clue about the origins of Ghosts. Something I’ve spent a century searching for. A possible solution to the question of who created us.”

The information came from an unexpected source, but it got them closer to cracking a question they had no way of answering. Sure, it was just a single name, but progress was progress.

“I can’t believe it… I finally found something,” Air stated with disbelief. She’d taken a major step forward. Unfortunately, they had no time to celebrate.

“Gaaah, ah… Ugh, aaah…!”

Deadrim started coughing, a bloody froth spewing from her mouth. She appeared to be on the verge of death, and the Devil’s Bullet would not affect a dead body. They had to decide what to do right away.

“……”

“Air,” Rain said as he closed his eyes before opening them once more.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to do what I think is right. Is that fine by you?”

“Go ahead. No matter what happens, I’ll watch over you from the sidelines.”

*That’s good…*

Those who wielded the Devil’s Bullet needed someone to stay by their side and observe their choices.

“Isuna Cole,” Rain called the man’s name as he held up his pistol and turned the muzzle toward him. “Your existence shall disappear from this

world, but I won’t ever forget you. Even when I reach the deepest depths of hell, I *will* remember you.”

A gunshot resounded. A moment later, a silver bullet pierced Isuna, the man Deadrim longed for even after death.

Thus…

…the world shifted.

## 8. THAT WORLD WAS…

A sense of vertigo washed over Rain as his eyesight flickered a few times. Once his head stopped spinning…

…he found himself in his room.

He was on his bed, as if he'd just awoken from a deep slumber. Still worried, he quickly sat up and examined his chest.

*……*

The wound Deadrim inflicted on him no longer existed.

*I'll probably never get used to how Reprogramming feels…*

Rain pressed his fingers into his chest. The absence of pain struck him as terribly odd. He examined his watch and realized it was about seven in the morning, which meant it was time to prepare for classes. And yet, the morning atmosphere felt serene and silent, without a single sound to disturb the peace.

Rain thought about how he'd just narrowly avoided death, as well as the fact that it'd only happened due to Isuna's disappearance. The skirmish on that snowy mountain over the second-generation Exelia had ceased to exist.

*Guess we've achieved our primary objective, at least.*

Rain had no way of knowing if Isuna's erasure had truly prevented Deadrim from becoming a Ghost. The world had shifted, so it was hard to tell much of anything, really. They could only confirm that after they collected information on the new world.

Rain rose from his bed and began changing into his uniform. If everything was normal, he had lectures scheduled for that day. He hoped to at least gather some information on the state of the world before those started.

After putting on his uniform, he reached for his coat, only to find…

"……"

…a bundle of blankets curled up on the sofa next to his coatrack. He didn't even need to check to know the contents, since a tuft of silvery hair poked out of it.

"Air."

"I'm not awake." Her reply was as curt as it was immediate.

*So you are awake.*

"I made sure we shifted to a safe place, then decided to rest. All that stuff on the mountain took a lot out of me, so today I'm…tapping out."

"…Shouldn't we be gathering information about this timeline?"

"We can do that later."

“Should we really put it off?”

“We just got a whole bunch of information we need to sort through. We should figure that out before searching for any new intel. Otherwise, there’ll be too much to take in.”

“Good point…”

They’d heard a hint about Ghosts that felt concrete, which they had to focus on.

“So with that in mind, I’m taking a nap. And I’ll go over what we know soon after, which will keep me from moving around. I won’t stop you if you insist on doing recon by yourself, though. Knock yourself out.”

*…You’re just telling me to go gather intel on my own, aren’t you?*

Seeing her act all bossy and arrogant felt oddly soothing.

*…She’s back to being the same old Air.*

He thought back to their conversation on that mountain, how they’d nestled together and how she’d served as his crutch. She’d cried and lashed out, putting her emotions on full display. The way she’d acted back then was, without a doubt, a part of her true self.

Sure, he didn’t understand everything about her, but he still knew a great deal of what made Air, *Air*. Their relationship had developed since they’d first met, so they no longer wanted to just use each other.

*It is different…right?*

Before leaving his room, Rain peeled back the blankets a little, exposing Air’s small head. Then he brushed his fingers through her hair.

“…What are you doing?” she asked.

“Combing your hair. In a way.”

“No, I mean, *why*?”

“I dunno. You just looked kinda worried to me.”

Air fell silent for a short while. “…I mean, even I get anxious from time to time,” she eventually said as she pulled the blanket up over her head to keep him from seeing her expression. “That Kaisei guy controlled Deadrim…and I’m a Ghost, just like her. Who’s to say I’m not being manipulated?”

Her concern was understandable. The western officer, Kaisei, had controlled all of Deadrim’s actions through a pact bullet. The man who may have been behind the Ghosts as a whole had turned her into a bloodthirsty maniac without her even knowing it. And so, Air had no way to know she wasn’t being influenced in a similar manner.

“Honestly, I’m scared. Am I the real Air? Am I truly acting on my free will? Is wanting to end the war even my own desire? I can’t tell… I have no way to know!”

No one knew the “real” Air, since she’d lived one hundred years ago, so Rain had no way to assuage her concerns. He had no way to truly understand her deep-seated fears and doubts.

“…Hey,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“When you pat my head like this, I feel like I’m your cat or something.”

The only thing Rain could do was reach out to her and let her know he would always remain by her side.

“What, you don’t like it?”

“I mean, it’s…uh…” Air trailed off but didn’t make any attempts to move away. She simply stayed put and let Rain brush his fingers through her hair. After a while, her breathing took on the slow rhythm of sleep. Her opinion on the matter was probably favorable.

Rain kept stroking her hair for a bit longer. And after lifting her hair up a bit…

*You suck at pretending to sleep, you know that?*

…he found that her ears had flushed red. Still, the sight amused him, so he didn’t stop.

As he walked toward the lecture hall, Rain mulled over everything that had happened. He needed to make sense of the information he had before gathering more, after all.

*The whole chain of events with the second-generation Exelia was strange…*

He'd been charged with guarding prototype units that were described as "not ready for live combat." They were apparently experimental models made to test the flow engine, but the unit he'd used still served as a powerful weapon.

Rain had some background in Exelia development, including flow engine research, so the Turret-Model Exelia's performance struck him as odd.

*It felt way too close to completion.*

They'd only finished the engine's structure a mere two years ago. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken at least ten years to implement it properly, since developing new weapons systems was a lengthy process. But somehow, the Turret Model seemed approximately two years out from full-blown deployment.

O'ltmenia didn't have the manpower or funds to progress research that quickly.

……

The unidentified units they'd fought on the mountain confused him as well. He and Air had only cooperated with Deadrim and Isuna for so long due to their presence. Those soldiers didn't seem to be in league with the East or the West, which meant a completely separate faction had known all about the second-generation Exelias.

That faction had organized a platoon of over thirty men in an unusual environment like a snowy mountain…almost as if they'd predicted the train car would fall down the cliff with the Exelia in it.

*None of this makes any sense…*

However, most of all, Kaisei Reisman, the man who'd organized Deadrim's battles and likely manipulated her with a pact bullet, weighed on his mind. If everything they suspected was true, then he was likely responsible for the entire incident. No, not just him. Something much bigger than one man had clearly pulled all those strings.

Nausea struck him. Rain refused to be optimistic and assume it had all happened by coincidence. His intuition colored his thoughts with paranoia, so he couldn't help but believe the incident had been engineered to put something major into motion.

*But what?*

The same eerie, creeping feeling he got when he first learned someone had pushed the Ghosts into fighting resurfaced within him, which in turn triggered an indescribable sense of dread and disgust.

……

Rain approached Alestra Academy's courtyard as such thoughts ran through his mind. It looked the same as ever. Isuna Cole had disappeared… and as a result, Deadrim likely never even became a Ghost. It had all

worked out for the best. But for whatever reason, everything felt oddly artificial.

*Maybe I'm just being a worrywart…* Rain shook his head upon concluding that his baseless anxiety was a mere figment of his imagination. He needed to focus on gathering information instead, so he made his way toward the library, which archived newspapers daily, to learn more about the Reprogrammed world.

However, someone interrupted him as he prepared to step inside.

"Rain!" they called out to him from behind, sounding relieved. "Wait!"

"Athly…?"

"Haaah, haaah… I…finally found you…"

Athly rushed over to him, her voice hoarse. She'd clearly run out of breath, which meant she'd spent quite some time running around to search for him. Rain wondered what he'd done in that timeline to cause such concern.

"I'm so glad you're fine… You're not hurt…"

"…Uh, obviously?"

"Oh, thank goodness…"

She was so out of breath that she barely managed to string her words together. Though, the implication that he was *supposed* to be hurt was troubling.

*Did something happen to me in this timeline?*

He examined his body but failed to find any wounds. Additionally, he felt no pain, unpleasantness, or nausea. At worst, he felt a bit sluggish from all the thinking.

But then, why had Athly run around in a panic? Why had she appeared so worried?

"What's wrong, Athly?"

"…Thank you."

"Huh?"

"That confirms it."

*…Confirms what, exactly?*

"I'll see you later, Rain. There's somewhere I have to be." Athly left those parting words behind as she walked off. Apparently she'd needed confirmation, but Rain didn't understand what she wanted to know.

*She said "I'm so glad you're fine"…but why?*

Rain should not have been in any danger in the new timeline. In the world before the Reprogramming, he fell off the cliff with the rest of the car, but they'd erased those events. Plus, only someone who possessed the Devil's Bullet noticed the shifts, so that couldn't have been it.

*…I should ask her about it later.*

Rain headed for the library to gather more information. This early in the morning, there was no one else inside.

"Ah…!"

And so, the sound of a bottle shattering against the floor rang out all the more clearly. Rain had knocked it down in surprise.

“What…the hell…?!”

He’d slammed the newspaper against the desk in shock, which made the bottle sitting on it teeter, fall, and crash to the floor. Shards of glass scattered about as Rain stared at the newspaper in shock. The grim reality of the newly Reprogrammed world shocked him to his core.

**The West commences its invasion of the eastern capital, Alestra.**

**Over three thousand confirmed dead.**

**Number of wounded individuals rapidly rising. Estimated to exceed five thousand by tomorrow.**

**Great losses suffered due to the West’s second-generation Melee-Model Exelia.**

*The West’s…second-generation Exelia?! That’s impossible!*

Second-generation Exelia technology should have been exclusive to the East. But if that article was to be believed, the West had already possessed *and* perfected it.

*Something… Something’s changed…in a big way…*

And that change was due to the Devil’s Bullet.

*I… We… There’s no turning back for us now…*

An indescribable sense of dread loomed over him as he realized he’d caused a great shift in the currents of history.

*What changed? No… What did I change?*

# AFTERWORD

I'm glad I managed to deliver Volume 2 of my story to all of you. Thank you all so, so much for picking it up. As we look back over it, let's discuss the characters who stole the show this time.

1. Deadrim

The Ghost who serves as the crux of this particular story. Volume 1 introduced Air, Alec, and Kirlilith, and now Deadrim assumes the role of the fourth Ghost. Her concept is "a wild katana-wielding girl." I initially only thought of her long, black hair and katana, but after I finished the script, I imagined her with a cute ribbon. TEDDY drew her with one, even though I never said anything about it. I swear, TEDDY *really* gets me!

2. Isuna

Deadrim's childhood friend…and likely the most pitiable character in this volume. His concept is "an alternate version of Rain." He's a serious, earnest man with impressive skills who always works hard, yet never gets rewarded. Still, the fact that he doesn't give up makes him a true hero (in my humble opinion, at least).

3. Kreis

She may seem like a nasty person based on the events of Volume 2, but she's actually a good woman at heart. It's just that she's been involved in many life-or-death struggles over the years and has experienced her fair share of bitter failures, so she forces herself to don a harsh persona. Her concept is "a mom who's strict around her daughter's boyfriend." Like, break up with that loser already! Air is her old friend and comrade, but she kind of treats her like a poorly disciplined daughter.

4. Kaisei

Appears in name only, sneaking around and brewing up all sorts of trouble behind the scenes.

5. Athly

The secondary heroine of the story, who unfortunately barely appeared in this volume. She should become more central to the plot going forward, though.

I would now like to extend my thanks to the good people at the editorial department, TEDDY, Naohiro Washio, and everyone else involved with the making of this book. Volume 2 only got published due to all your hard work.

I'm a bit of a flighty person, so your support kept me steady as I wrote. Thank you all so, *so* much.

Also, I'd like to sincerely thank my readers for picking up my books—and this volume in particular. I'd be thrilled if you continued to do so.

I hope to see you again soon.

***Kei Uekawa***

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